

Dissertação de Mestrado Erasmus Mundus em  
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# A Contemporary Representation of Reality: the Hysterical Realist Novel

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## ABSTRACT

Literary critics are faced with the difficult task of categorizing a wide corpus of contemporary narratives that have conquered the hearts of millions of readers worldwide, through their sardonic way of representing today's reality and their particular interpretation of the novel's traditional form. It is the case of hysterical realist novels, a new literary genre that constitutes the object of this present study, which explores the main aspects of this type of narratives by considering their perspective of the world and their means of achieving the effect of reality. The research commences with an overview of the main theories that have shaped literary realism as we know it today, with a primary emphasis on the reader-response approach and its corresponding methods. The textual analysis employs some of these theories in order to discuss why hysterical realist novels fail to convince the readers of their verisimilitude, despite of the fact that their stories comply with the laws of logic and plausibility. One of the main findings highlights the idea that fulfilling the condition of truthfulness within the internal world of the novel does not guarantee a realist actualization of the text, as the reader fails to displace the presented facts within his own observed reality. This is the result of an overuse of reality, as these novels display complicated webs of events that incorporate a large quantity of interconnected characters, in this way trying to accomplish their task of pinning down the latest cultural tendencies of today's constantly changing society. The research also offers the perspective of hysterical realist authors on the form of the contemporary novel, and discusses the way in which these authors reinterpret the traditional function of paratextual elements in order to reinforce their authority as reliable sources of knowledge.

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## **1. Introduction to the objectives of the dissertation**

The present paper situates itself in the field of contemporary literature, as it discusses the precepts of a new type of narrative that seeks to offer a modern perspective of nowadays reality. The main objective of the study is to analyze the representation of reality in hysterical realist narratives and discuss their value of truthfulness within the world of the novel and on a level of the reader's actualization of the text. I will demonstrate the fact that the norms of literary realism do no longer suit the contemporary novel, which is faced with the difficult task of illustrating the 'hysterical' rhythm of the present society. This point is part of a larger discussion on the survival of literature in a technology-dominated world, and its continuous transformation in order to keep up with the latest cultural tendencies. This dissertation will attempt to respond to these modern day issues of literature production which preoccupy critics, authors and readers alike, by studying the case of the hysterical realist narrative and the literary model that the new genre proposes to contemporary writers.

The issue of hysterical realism is particularly controversial due to various reasons, which have to do with the pejorative connotation of the name and with the fact that it was established in a James Wood's harsh critical review of the new contemporary novel. The literary critic refers to the publically acclaimed works of authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Zadie Smith or Salman Rushdie, as being typical examples of the "big, contemporary novel – a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity."<sup>1</sup> The author refers to the fact that these books are more preoccupied with sharing a large amount of interconnected stories, rather than with conveying authentic human experiences and feelings. However, regardless of their poorly developed characters and complicated plots, these novels have managed to win the hearts of millions of readers all around the globe. The literary criticism has tried to categorize these narratives, yet the hybrid structure and content of hysterical realist books have made it difficult to classify them in terms of already established genres. Thus the vivid necessity of a new denomination, which can truly comprise the essence of this type of contemporary novels. For these reasons, I have chosen to adopt Wood's term and I will use it to refer to the works of Zadie Smith and Junot Díaz, whose texts I will analyze in order to respond to the previously established research questions.

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<sup>1</sup> James Wood, 'James Wood's Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian "Hysterical Realism"', *The New Republic on-line magazine*, 24 July 2000.

This dissertation is one of the few existing academic studies on hysterical realism and its manifestation within the context of contemporary literature. The paper will be divided into three sections, and each of them will discuss a distinct aspect of the subject matter, in this way offering a manifold perspective on the recent narratives that have changed the face of present-day literature.

The first part of the study will discuss the concept of literary realism and its key precepts, from the ancient notion of *mimesis* to the reader-response theories which still find their echo with the critical literary thought of today. This section will offer a historical perspective on an artistic movement that has been present in the field of literature ever since its beginnings, but which concretized itself as a genre only later on, starting with the work of philosophers such as Descartes and Locke and receiving “its first formulation by Thomas Reid in the middle of the eighteenth century”.<sup>2</sup> In this process, I will closely follow Darío Villanueva’s own interpretation of the genre, which is widely argued in his *Theories of Literary Realism*.<sup>3</sup> Villanueva’s study offers a new angle on the main critical thoughts on literary realism and classifies them according to their essential focal point. The author distinguishes between three main types of realism: genetic (where the central point is the author and the creation process), formal (focusing on the structure and style of the text) and intentional (adopting a phenomenological and pragmatic angle).<sup>4</sup> I will discuss these different approaches from an anachronistic point of view, as I consider chronology to be of less importance in the given case, but rather from the main object of their focus: the author, the text or the reader. The author’s categorization helps systematize the disparate literary theories that have regulated the realist novel, in this way offering a historical perspective of a genre which has often been shrouded in “imprecision, ambiguity, and polysemia.”<sup>5</sup> I have chosen Villanueva’s extended study on literary realism due to its coherent structure and interpretive outlook, which helped me understand the basic theoretical pillars that sustain the development of this genre. The critic’s theory on intentional realism and its main principles will offer the analytical tools which I will need later on, in order to explain the production of the effect of reality in hysterical realist novels.

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<sup>2</sup> Ian P. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Darío Villanueva, *Theories of Literary Realism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

The second part of the dissertation will consider the literary mechanisms that trigger the effect of reality in the context of hysterical realist narratives. I will attempt to find out the reason why these types of novels fail to convince the reader of their truthfulness, despite of the fact that they depict credible facts that were inspired from today's world. In order to do so, I will apply some of the intentional realist theories that have been discussed in the first chapter of this paper, to a corpus of two contemporary books, which have proved their belonging to the hysterical realist genre in terms of structure and content: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (the novel whose critical review introduced the name for this kind of writings) and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. I will depart from James Wood's critique of the new novel, where he traces the main features of hysterical realism and discusses them in close relation to the traditional form of the realist narrative. The literary critic emphasizes the major flaw of the contemporary novel as being the underdevelopment of its characters, and the focus on sharing knowledge, rather than depicting the feelings and emotions of its protagonists. However, despite of their historical truthfulness and faithful portrayal of the world, these texts lack credibility; they do not persuade the reader into regarding them as part of his observed reality. In order to prove this hypothesis, I will analyze the previously mentioned novels by taking into consideration Villanueva's theory on intentional realism and its corresponding principles and hypothesis, such as the possible worlds theory of critics such as Marie-Laure Ryan, Lubomír Doležel and Thomas Pavel; Harshav's theory of fields of reference and Barthes' concept of the effect of reality, among others. By distinguishing between the internal world of the novel and the external non-fictional one, I will demonstrate the fact that hysterical realist novels do fulfill the condition of verisimilitude within the episodes that compose their narrative, however the juxtaposition of these stories seems somehow improbable and leads to the annulment of the realist effect. I will also comment on the principle of interconnectedness that governs these books, and its function to distract the reader from the "inhumanity" of the characters.<sup>6</sup> I will dedicate a considerable amount of this chapter to the matter of character construction, which holds a crucial role in any type of realist writing. This issue is specifically important in the case of hysterical realist novels, as they display a large quantity of protagonists who are involved in a complicated net of events. My aim is to demonstrate the fact that these characters seem unreal due to their interconnectedness and through the quantity of life-changing episodes that dictate their existence, and not necessarily because of their schematic representations.

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<sup>6</sup> James Wood, *James Wood's Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian "Hysterical Realism"*.

The last chapter of the dissertation will bring a new perspective on hysterical realism, as I will analyze the genre from the point of view of the novel's form, by focusing on what Gerard Genette denominates as the epitextual and peritextual apparatus<sup>7</sup>. In this case, the epitextual elements include author interviews, critical reviews and literary blog entries which debate the advantages and limitations of the new genre. I will start with the dispute between James Wood and Zadie Smith over the literary form that would fit best the contemporary novel, an argument which was published in the on-line edition of *The Guardian*. These critiques represent two different outlooks on the modern narrative: Wood's traditional approach, which urges modern writers to focus on characters as embodiments of human personalities and emotions, and Zadie Smith's response that calls for a new form of the novel, which can accurately depict today's reality. I will demonstrate the fact that the hysterical realist novel attempts to represent the world by stepping away from the norms of traditional literary realism, in this way proposing a new narrative structure. In order to do so, I will consider Zadie Smith's essay on "the novel's third way"<sup>8</sup>, together with a series of interviews in which her and Junot Díaz discuss their perspective of current reality and give their opinion on today's novel. If the first part of this chapter has a more theoretical aspect, its second part will be an analysis of the functions of different peritextual elements such as the title, epigraphs or footnotes, within the previously mentioned corpus of books. I will attempt to demonstrate the fact that these components have been used in hysterical realist narratives in order to convey important information for a more complex understanding of the novel, but also to appeal to the reader's cultural background and knowledge of the world. The overall analysis of different paratextual components will help me illustrate the main aim of hysterical narratives to offer information and a general outlook of the contemporary society, rather than faithfully imitate reality.

To sum up, my study revolves around the new contemporary novel, which proposes a different literary model that reflects the main tendencies of today's world; meeting the modern reader's expectation of being entertained, but at the same time staying informed. It is the case of hysterical realist narratives, which focus more on how the world works, rather than conveying authentic human personalities and attitudes. I expect to identify the mechanisms that hysterical realist authors employ in their narratives in order to achieve the effect of reality and establish themselves as reliable sources of information, despite the

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<sup>7</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Holmes, 'The Novel's Third Way: Zadie Smith's 'Hysterical Realism'', in *Reading Zadie Smith: The First Decade and Beyond*, ed. by Philip Tew (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 141-154.



fictional aspect of the events that they depict in their stories. I will also try to understand why these books have gained such a rising popularity all around the world, by considering the means through which their writers have managed to keep up with the constantly changing reality of the present-day. The overall aim of the dissertation is to create space for a further discussion on the inherent bound between fiction and reality, and to observe the way in which contemporary literature has adapted to today's cultural panorama in terms of structure and content, by producing a new literary genre which satisfies the modern reader's thirst of knowledge.

## **2. Methodology**

The methodology of my research will consist in the use of literary texts, but also criticism, book reviews and author interviews, as main sources to help me create a solid theoretical foundation that will support the formulation of a response for the questions of the study, while at the same time insure the reader of the reliability of the assumptions under discussion.

In order to develop the theoretical framework that occupies the first part of the thesis, I will generate a review of a comprehensive study on literary realism, which compiles all major critical theories according to their different schools and ideological foundation. I have chosen this approach due to the necessity of obtaining an overall perspective on literary realism, on its extent and limitations. I will also support this hypothetical data with supplementary readings of other literary theory texts, which will fill in the information gaps of the original review.

This general outline will insure me with the analytical tools that I need for the second part of the research, where I will apply some of the previously discussed theories to a literary corpus. The choice of these methods has been made on the premise of their relevance in the context of the research question. My main concern is to study the production of reality in hysterical realist novels, primarily by considering the means of achieving the effect of reality. Thus I will choose some of the intentional realist theories that concentrate on distinguishing between fiction and reality, and whose practical application will help me later on establish the main literary techniques employed by hysterical realist authors in order to achieve a realist actualization of their works. I will mainly employ a qualitative analysis of various text fragments that will have been elected previously, based on their pertinence and capacity to offer a consistent response to the study question. The findings will be subsequently processed into a series of hypothesis, which will be then presented in the form of a conclusion, at the end of the chapter.

If the previous part of the thesis is limited to the study to the internal field of the novel, the third section will incorporate an external perspective on the proposed narratives, which will promote a deeper understanding of the research question. In order to expand the data of the previous findings, I will attempt to situate them in the context of today's latest ideological tendencies, and understand how these factors have shaped and dominated their existence. This last chapter is divided into two parts: the first one considers the research matter in

exterior sources such as author interviews, book reviews and literary essays, while the second part examines the paratextual apparatus of the corpus of novels. These two complementary approaches will offer an exhaustive perspective on hysterical realism as a viable literary tool to represent reality. I will firstly debate the form of the contemporary novel in the context of the present cultural manifestations of the world, by referring to an on-line literary dispute between literary critic James Wood and hysterical realist writer Zadie Smith. I have selected these reviews due to their opposing attitudes towards the literary scene of today, which will provide me with a solid theoretical base for a further analysis of hysterical realism and its relevance in the context of contemporary literature. My argument will develop with the perspective of other writers such as Junot Díaz, who has repeatedly advocated for a new form of the novel, but also with Smith's literary essay on "the novel's third way."<sup>9</sup> I will concretize all these sources into a set of assumptions, which I will later verify in the second section of the present chapter, by applying them to the previously mentioned corpus of texts and demonstrating their influence on the structure and content of the novels. All these data will be comprised later on into an articulate conclusion, which will enrich and expand the results obtained in the previous section of this paper.

Ultimately, I will use specific reference management software in order to manage all the bibliographic data of the research, together with other related study materials such as PDF files, internet based materials and specialized dictionaries.

The dissertation report proposed a different approach to the topic in question, which aimed to demonstrate the assumption that hysterical realism is an independent genre that proposes an original form which can satisfy the literary requirements of contemporary writers. The initial analysis aimed to apply the main precepts of magic realism, a genre which Wood had identified as being the closest literary model to hysterical realism, to the same corpus of books that I have analyzed in the final form of this research, in an attempt to demonstrate the fact that these norms suffer a series of alterations, which in fact delimitate the structure of a new literary genre. However, the task of finding a consistent generalized theory of magic realism has proved to be unachievable, due to the fact that the genre has not "successfully differentiated between itself and its neighbouring genres"; and as a result of its ambiguous

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<sup>9</sup> Holmes, *The Novel's Third Way: Zadie Smith's 'Hysterical Realism'*.

aspect, some critics have decided to abandon the term as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Thus I have decided to start from the hypothesis that hysterical realism is indeed an original literary genre which springs from the traditional literary realism, in this way focusing more on the literary mechanisms that it employs in order to represent reality and achieve the effect of reality within the narrative. I believe that the latter approach will help justify the relevance of hysterical realism in contemporary literature scene, which can be a starting point for a further study, demonstrating the fact that hysterical realism is an original genre with a coherent literary agenda.

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Post-colonial Discourse', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 407-426, (p.407).

### 3. Theoretical considerations on literary realism

#### 3.1. Introduction

This first chapter will offer a brief perspective on the existing theories of literary realism, laying a theoretical foundation for the following section, which will deal with hysterical realism and its production of reality. In this process, I will closely follow Darío Villanueva's perspective on literary realism, which is widely argued in his *Theories of Literary Realism*.

In the preface of the work, the author clearly establishes the main purpose of his study as to “seek a point of equilibrium between the principle of the autonomy of the literary work vis-à-vis reality and the complex relations that the work clearly establishes with this reality.”<sup>11</sup> Given the abstract nature of the point in question, Villanueva focuses on answering the matter by taking into account the main critical thoughts on literary realism and classifying them according to their essential focal point. Therefore he distinguishes between three main types of realism: genetic (where the central point is the author and the creation process), formal (focusing on the structure and style of the text) and intentional (adopting a phenomenological and pragmatic angle).<sup>12</sup> The author comments on each of these branches of realism and discusses their critical dogma, practical application within the literary text, connections to other artistic fields and last but not least, the leading supporting authors who have adopted it in their works. The study demonstrates the limitations of genetic realism and its following ideology, formal realism, in opposition to the latter reader-oriented view of literary realism. Villanueva subscribes to the tendencies of reader-response criticism, by promoting intentional realism as the most effective tool to draw the boundaries of literary realism, a concept that has been surrounded by “imprecision, ambiguity, and polysemia”.<sup>13</sup>

#### 3.2. The philosophical foundations of realism

Although the term *realism* has been employed in literature for the first time only in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in a letter exchange between Goethe and Schiller on the Homeric technique of “the retarding element”<sup>14</sup>, the very idea that lies beyond this denomination has its roots in the Ancient Greek *mimesis*. The connection between the two concepts has been a subject of

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<sup>11</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. ix.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 50 anniversary edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 5.

debate for literary critics, who have invariably turned to the ancient philosophical term in order to provide a viable theory of realism that could be applicable to the field of literature. However, regardless of their common ideological ground, these theories have adopted very different courses, and the discrepancies between them reside in their different manners of viewing reality as being reflected in a literary text. If some critics assign the quality of being “realistic” to works that closely imitate a certain historical reality, others believe that authenticity is the main element that persuades the reader to give the narrated events the benefit of the doubt. Other views focus on the form of the text and consider language as a device of recreating facts of existence, situating it on a higher hierarchical stage than the facts *per se*.

Villanueva’s *Theories of Literary Realism* recounts the most substantial critical thoughts on the matter of literary realism and classifies them into three main categories, by taking into account the following criteria: the analysis of the literary text from a linguistic and structural perspective, the mimetic facet of the literary creation and the phenomenological and pragmatic aspects of realism from the prospect of the reader.<sup>15</sup>

### **3.2.1. The Greek thought**

But before discussing the mechanisms that transform the literary text into a realist one, it is important to explain the concept of *reality* itself and understand the main philosophical foundations of all types of realism; starting from Plato’s *imitation* and Aristotle’s *mimesis*. Stephen Halliwell, in his *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, explains the importance of these two antique concepts with a predominant focus on the area of literature and emphasizes their major influence over time on various artistic levels, in spite of their ambiguous meaning and lack of a clearly demarcated theoretical framework.<sup>16</sup> The author distinguishes between the two philosophical perceptions in terms of art representation, and assigns to Plato the “world-simulating” model, while accrediting the “world-reflecting” one to Aristotle.<sup>17</sup> Villanueva discusses the aesthetic effects of Plato and Aristotle’s postulates on reality, as viewed from the perspective of philosopher Max Wundt: “an artist steeped in Platonism will be a realist through the stylized forms, purified from the world of

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<sup>15</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. ix.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

the senses (...); whereas an Aristotelian artist will present the visible in an integrative manner, in order to discover an authentic reality in it.”<sup>18</sup>

As far as language is concerned, there are two approaches that subsequently emerge from the two classical ideologies: the first one is attributed to John Locke and his theory of language, who advocates the “clarity of the language”<sup>19</sup>, denying the figurative aspect of the words and considering them to be direct images of reality; while the second approach, promoted by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, offers language a certain autonomy and the power to reveal reality, thus making it responsible for creating a new world within the literary text, independently from the observed reality.<sup>20</sup>

The Greek classical thought has provided a strong foundation for the Western way of reasoning, and its impact can be studied thoroughly over time through the medium of literary texts. These documents are considered to be detailed chronicles of society at a certain point in time and space; in this way tracking the ideological changes that have taken place over the years and helping us understand how our present beliefs have been formed. However, it is important to keep in mind their other function, which Horatio points out in his memorable formula regarding the aim of literature: “to teach and to delight”.<sup>21</sup> Thus one might ask himself where the frontier between reality and fiction is, or whether such a factor exists in the first place. Throughout time, this reality-fiction dyad has been questioned repeatedly, in an attempt to settle a clear boundary between the two, and although there is no global theory to regulate literature as a whole, there are various philosophies that have reinforced the priority of one element or another. Villanueva talks about two main movements that derive from this basically essentialist tendency of viewing literature, and encompasses them in the concepts of *mimesis* and *aesthetic*.<sup>22</sup> The terms demarcate their analogous types of realism, *genetic* and *formal*, which I will comment upon in the following paragraphs.

### 3.3. Genetic realism

In *Fenomenología y pragmática del realismo literario*, Villanueva pleads for the necessity of equilibrium between “el principio de la autonomía de la obra literaria frente a las

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<sup>18</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Rafey Habib, *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2008), p. 276.

<sup>20</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur S. Trace, *Literature: Its Opponents and Its Power* (Maryland: University Press of America, 2002), p. 78.

<sup>22</sup> Darío Villanueva, ‘Fenomenología y pragmática del realismo literario’, in *Avances en teoría de la literatura*, ed. by Darío Villanueva (Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Servicio de Publicacións e Intercambio Científico, 1994), pp. 165-185 (p. 168).

determinaciones de la realidad y las indudables relaciones que aquélla mantiene con ésta.”<sup>23</sup> He emphasizes the fact that Aristotle’s notion of *mimesis* had stood as the main denomination for the representation of reality in literature, until it was latterly replaced with the term *realism*<sup>24</sup>; a statement that has dangerous consequences, as its logical interpretation leads to the conclusion that the two concepts actually overlap. Rafey Habib quotes Ian Watt’s comment on this modern way of viewing *mimesis*, considering that it “begins from the position that the truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses.”<sup>25</sup> This belief led to a type of literary realism that the author names *genetic realism*<sup>26</sup>, which relies on viewing the text as a loyal copy of reality, thus the emphasis on the author’s point of view and on his mechanism of deciphering physical and emotional experiences. The realistic aspect of the work depends greatly on the way in which the writer consciously perceives his existence and subsequently manages to transfer that observed reality into a written form. A simple narrative or explanation of the facts does not suffice, as the literary text should reflect the authentic human experience devotedly, without interfering with it or modifying it in any way.

### 3.3.1. Émile Zola’s experimental novel

Writers have interpreted the principle of the literary text as a precise mirror of reality through their own lenses, thus their works show different variations of the basic esthetic precept. Villanueva considers naturalism as one of the extreme interpretations of genetic realism and comments on Émile Zola’s experimental novel, the main drive of this artistic movement.<sup>27</sup> Zola’s method highlights the novelist’s dual function, for he is “equally an observer and an experimentalist”, thus he must “give the facts as he has observed them”, but at the same time “introduce an experiment”, create the characters that fulfill those facts and incorporate them into the narrative, without altering the observed reality or laws of nature.<sup>28</sup> This perspective brings a strong scientific approach to the field of literature, as the French writer recommends novelists to “operate on the characters, the passions, on the human and social data, in the

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<sup>23</sup> Villanueva, 1994, p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 12, quoted in Habib, p. 474.

<sup>26</sup> Villanueva, 1994, p. 168.

<sup>27</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Gay Wilson Allen and Harry Hayden Clark, *Literary Criticism, Pope to Croce* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), p. 593.



same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on inanimate beings, and as the physiologist operates on living beings.”<sup>29</sup>

Zola’s naturalistic approach also extends to the linguistic aspect of the literary text, where he pleads for the transparency of the language, to the detriment of the form.<sup>30</sup> Thus the idea that behind every “abstract belief or hypothetical construct” there lies a “a concrete, real event or physical entity”<sup>31</sup>, an idea which has its roots in the classical Platonic philosophy, but which was argued by many critics, due to the fact that it denies the aesthetic aspect of a literary text.<sup>32</sup> In other words, it would be wrong to consider the literary language in the same terms in which we consider language in general, in its basic everyday use. If words mirrored reality faithfully, then there would be no difference whatsoever between the two forms of expression, establishing a relationship of equality among them. Russian formalists have tried to illustrate the difference between the conventional and the literary language through scientific means, by studying “the linguistic patterns of sounds” and their “morphological features”.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.3.2. Variations of genetic realism

The French writer and art critic Champfleury was also a fervent promoter of realism, not only in art, but also in the field of literature. However, in contradiction to Zola’s methods, the critic recognized the shortcomings of maintaining a faithful portrayal of reality while transforming it into a written form, and pleaded for sincerity as a way of achieving the effect of realism.<sup>34</sup> Thus it would not suffice for the novelist to closely observe the world around him, as he would also have to preserve “a faithful compliance with the truth”, and this effect is to be achieved through his sincerity, not necessarily through his artistic skills.<sup>35</sup> Champfleury’s view on literary realism adopts a more balanced perspective of reality, stepping away from the extreme practices of naturalism, which had been accused of being unnatural and inflexible. Other genetic realists maintained a close connection to the coordinates of time and space, considering the aesthetic to be bound to a specific historical

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<sup>29</sup> Émile Zola, *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, trans. Belle M. Sherman (New York: Haskell House, 1964), as quoted in Habib, p. 480.

<sup>30</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Bo Bennett, *Logically Fallacious: The Ultimate Collection of Over 300 Logical Fallacies (Academic Edition)* (eBookIt.com, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> Habib, p. 606.

<sup>34</sup> Luc Herman, *Concepts of Realism* (Columbia: Camden House, 1996), p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 17.

context. Erich Auerbach considers realism as “the serious representation of the social reality of that epoch, based on continuous historical movement.”<sup>36</sup> Hungarian Marxist philosopher George Lukács reinforces this perspective and points out that the realist effect of a text is not limited to the complexity of the characters or to the complicated narrative, but it also relies “on an expression of these as typical of, or embodying, the broader historical movements of their time.”<sup>37</sup> These views inscribe within the Marxist literary criticism, whose main aim is to “explain the literary work more fully” by regarding “forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history.”<sup>38</sup>

Villanueva insists on the connection between the Marxist literary criticism and genetic realism and dedicates an important part of his study to analyzing Lukács’s theory of reflection. According to the Hungarian philosopher, in every realist text, there is a third element that acts between the observation of reality and its literary representation, which is the ideology of the viewer.<sup>39</sup> This theory contradicts the main naturalistic approach, by stating that every observer has a personal opinion, largely based on a corpus of beliefs and a system of values, which make up a certain vision of the world; and that this individual perspective acts as a filter for all the contemplated facts. While focusing on the philosophical and the mimetic aspect of a literary work, Marxists have commonly rejected any kind of regulations regarding the form of the text, claiming that “inbred attention to sheer technical properties [...] robs literature of historical significance and reduces it to an aesthetic game.”<sup>40</sup>

### 3.4. Formal realism

If genetic realism insists on the imitative aspect of the text and implicitly on the author’s observation and representation of reality, formal realism emphasizes the internal world of the text and relies on the author’s imagination, in this way granting the literary work an autonomous status.<sup>41</sup> This new perspective stepped away from the Aristotelian mimetic tradition and saw reality as an exterior element, rather than an intricate one. The name of this aesthetic was pinned down by Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*, where he explains the fact that formal realism “allows a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in its

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<sup>36</sup> Auerbach, Erich, “Epilegomena zu Mimesis”, *Romanische Forschungen* 65, 1-2, pp. 1-18, as quoted in Villanueva, 1997, p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> Habib, p. 475.

<sup>38</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1976), p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> Eagleton, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 37.

temporal and spatial environment”, while at the same time warning that “the accurate transcription of actuality does not produce a work of any real truth.”<sup>42</sup> Maupassant records this latter artistic tendency and signals a shift from an ontological perspective of the literary work, which is fundamental in the case of genetic realism, to a constructivist one<sup>43</sup>, where the focus is set on the author as a designer of a new reality.

Gustave Flaubert is one of the authors who have embraced formal realism, and who considers the aesthetic from an “impartial, impersonal and objective” perspective<sup>44</sup>, by creating an independent world within the text, and giving it a realistic effect through means of literary techniques. The French author detaches from the existence of his characters and narrates the facts without interfering with their feelings or thoughts, by means of maintaining the equilibrium between “high and low subjects”, by seeing subjects “as God sees them, in their true essence”; each character encapsulating both “the serious and the comic.”<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Flaubert’s “impersonal” narration creates the artistic effect of the text seen as a parody of reality, as its characters “deceive themselves into believing that they are conscious of their lives or of society’s history.”<sup>46</sup>

In their effort to grant the literary text its autonomy in relation to the observed reality and to oppose the excessively ontological perspective of genetic realists, formalists have also exaggerated the constructivist perspective of the literary work. Villanueva talks about the excess of “textual immanency”, which translates through a “total dissociation between the created world and the reality itself.”<sup>47</sup> On that account, the text has no affiliations with the real world or any historical events, and exists independently from the universe of the author and its biography. Therefore the literary text has to be “reduced to a pure embodiment of the author’s consciousness”, and to reflect, from a purely phenomenological perspective, the relation between “the author as a subject and the world as an object.”<sup>48</sup> However, this extreme immanent outlook has signaled the need of a more balanced theory of literary

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<sup>42</sup> Watt, p. 32.

<sup>43</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 39.

<sup>44</sup> Auerbach, p. 482.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 487.

<sup>46</sup> James H. Reid, *Narration and Description in the French Realist Novel: The Temporality of Lying and Forgetting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 64.

<sup>47</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 44.

<sup>48</sup> Eagleton, p. 51.

realism, and a return to the basic principle of Aristotle's mimesis: the existence of a referent.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.4.1. The effect of reality

In terms of achieving a realist actualization of a work, formalists have often ignored the importance that details hold to the creation of the effect of reality, "allowing such insignificant details to remain scandalously outside the purview of semiotic analysis."<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, Roland Barthes insists on the vital function that this literary mechanism holds within the realist narrative and discusses its importance in achieving *l'effet de réel* by analyzing Flaubert's descriptive technique in his short story, *A Simple Heart*.<sup>51</sup> The critic begins his study by commenting on the relevance of description in narratives, by questioning the relevance and significance of this rhetorical mode in achieving the effect of reality. Barthes identifies the function of description as being "justified by no finality of action or of communication", while at the same time fulfilling an aesthetic role, within the artistic values of the Western culture.<sup>52</sup> This perspective leads to the conclusion that descriptive paragraphs have no purpose to the overall meaning of the novel; however their presence in the narrative can be justified by "the laws of literature".<sup>53</sup> Thus the choice of revealing any additional explanatory details is left to the narrator or the character of the novel, and its function is tied to the relevance that those details have in the construction of the story. On the other hand, Barthes considers the usage of what he denominates "insignificant notations" as being "a self-sufficient" feature of reality, that does not need to be questioned in terms of performance and production of meaning, in this way accepting the verisimilitude of the discourse from the very beginning; a decision which is based only on taking the referent as a viable witness of reality.<sup>54</sup>

Barthes's theory on the effect of reality stems from a new concept of truthfulness, which moves away from the ancient model that considered facts 'only in relation to what is known of them by those who read or hear.'<sup>55</sup> The critic identifies this new model of verisimilitude

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<sup>49</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 46.

<sup>50</sup> Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, 'Notation After the "Reality Effect": Remaking Reference with Roland Barthes and Sheila Heti', *Representations*, 125, no. 1 (2014), pp. 80-102 (p. 81).

<sup>51</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 141.

<sup>52</sup> Barthes, p. 143.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

with the emergence of a new literary genre, which functionalizes “all details, to produce strong structures and to justify no notation by the mere guarantee of ‘reality’.”<sup>56</sup> It is in fact the case of literary realism, which interiorizes these apparently insignificant details as its intrinsic feature, thus stepping away from the formalist perspective which considered them as being “irreducible residues of functional analysis.”<sup>57</sup> Barthes situates the function of these “useless details” outside the sphere of universal significance production, and reinforces their autonomous aspect of conveying “concrete reality (insignificant gestures, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words).”<sup>58</sup> Thus the effect of reality is produced by removing any meaning that the sign might hold in the real world, and accepting its status of being genuine in relation to the internal structure of the narrative.

### **3.5. Intentional realism**

So far I have considered two of the leading theories of literary realism, which converge upon the basic elements of any literary text, such as the author (genetic realism) and the text (formal realism). However, there is a third component that is equally important in the literary reception, and which is embodied by the reader. This new focalization point emerged as a necessary step in the process of recovering from a literary criticism which was saturated with mimetic and immanent views, in this way generating a new type of realism which Villanueva labels as *intentional realism*.<sup>59</sup> The movement rose as a response against the rigidity of formalists, raising the question of the reader’s personal perspective, in contrast with the author’s outlook and the importance of the construction of the text.<sup>60</sup> The concept of intentional realism incorporates the reader-response and reception theory, an approach which emerged in the 1970s at the University of Constance in Germany, under the careful guidance of leading critics such as Wolfgang Iser or Hans Robert Jauss.<sup>61</sup>

#### **3.5.1. Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology**

Many of the reader-response theories find their roots in Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, a doctrine that plays with concepts such as reality and consciousness, and which is bound to study “pure phenomena.”<sup>62</sup> The German philosopher proposed the process of

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<sup>56</sup> Barthes, p. 147.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 89.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>61</sup> Habib, p. 708.

<sup>62</sup> Eagleton, p. 48.

*phenomenological reduction* as the main tool for achieving concrete, factual results of the observed world; by changing the focus of study from the “external world of objects toward examining the ways in which these objects appear to the human subject, and the subjective contribution to this process of appearing.”<sup>63</sup> Thus phenomenology gives priority to the subjective experience of reality, considering it more genuine and accurate than the nature of the external world. Consciousness mediates the relation between the inner and the outer universe, and plays a crucial part in the process of blocking concepts that are extrinsic to one’s own world, to such a degree that it ceases to be a “passive registration of the world, but it actively constitutes or intends it.”<sup>64</sup> By applying some of the main principles of phenomenology to the literary field, one can truly comprehend that reading is an open process in space and time, subject to a wide range of interpretations that depend on the inner experience of the recipient. Concurrently, the reader’s perception of reality revolves on a certain system of beliefs and values which have been shaped by his socio-cultural context.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, one can conclude that the reception of the literary text is deeply bound to the ideological considerations of a specific historical moment, in this way making it available for different understandings.

### 3.5.2. The principles of intentional realism

In his *Theories of Literary Realism*, Villanueva proposes a new theoretical approach on literary realism—which he denominates intentional realism—that closely follows Roman Ingarden’s three phenomenological principles, to which he adds a fourth one, inspired by Husserl’s phenomenological reduction.<sup>66</sup> The first principle is the *intentionality* one, which refers to the message that the author embeds within the literary text, an intention that can be later on capitalized by the reader or just remain in a latent state. The second precept regards “the literary work as a schematic formation and a layered structure, including a layer of represented objectivities.”<sup>67</sup> According to Ingarden, every literary work has *a multitude of layers* that belong to different fields, which can be physical (the material prop of the text: paper, computer disk etc.) or immaterial (such as linguistic tools, mode, tone, intention of the author etc.). All these aspects blend in together and form a coherent literary representation that can be interpreted in various manners due to its complex organization. Thus the text can

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<sup>63</sup> Habib, p. 709.

<sup>64</sup> Eagleton, p. 48.

<sup>65</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 49.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

be seen as an “intentional intersubjective object”<sup>68</sup>, giving the reader the power to transform and interpret the facts, adding a personal evaluation to a dormant literary work.

The third precept concerns the *actualization* of the literary work. In the field of literature, one can distinguish between the artistic object, represented by the literary text, and the aesthetic object, which is the actualization of the work. Concurrently, each of the text’s layers has its own artistic effect which is perceived by the reader in a distinct manner; all of these interpretations are interconnected and lead to the global meaning of the work. Last but not least, the critic introduces the *principle of epoché* or “the suspension of judgement”<sup>69</sup>, which encompasses the stance that the reader must adopt while reading a literary text. The precept refers to the fictional pact that is established between the text and the reader, as the latter suspends any reality-based assumptions and accepts to emerge into the world of the novel. However, although the recipient accepts the literary text as being genuine and accurate, at the same time he is conscious of the fact that the text is not a purely mimetic representation of reality.<sup>70</sup> I will discuss each of these principles at length, by focusing mainly on the fundamental theories that have consolidated the reader’s perspective in the process of decoding a literary work.

### 3.5.2.1. Intentionality

Villanueva identifies *intentionality* as being an imperative component of the eponymous branch of literary realism, and pairs it up with *convention*, as being the second decisive element that establishes the parameters within which a text is interpreted.<sup>71</sup> Regardless of the controversial nature that resides in its ambiguous meaning, the concept of *intentionality* applies to the area of realist literature by means of authorial objectives. In other words, the author imprints a certain message into his text, which may or may not lead the recipient towards achieving the previously established actualization of the work.<sup>72</sup> However, if the writer’s intention is delivered through the text and it is grasped by the reader, then it can be considered to be an *intersubjective intention*, as the sender and the receiver share a common empirical background.<sup>73</sup> It is important to point out the fact that the main contact between the

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<sup>68</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 49.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>72</sup> Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, *Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 67.

<sup>73</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 60.

author and the receiver is established through the literary text and although their experiences might be relatable, there is always the question of the extent to which the personal angle alters the initial communication. Thus the intention of the writer might be misinterpreted by the reader, in spite of the intersubjective character of the work.<sup>74</sup>

Intentional realism also aims to settle matters regarding reality and fantasy, while focusing on the reader as being the main agent that decides the degree of fictionality of a literary text. A fictional work loses its essentialist aspect of being a non-truth, in the sense of not having a referent in the real world; instead, the recipient is left to judge whether he can relate to the situation as being applicable to reality or not.<sup>75</sup> Thus the boundary between truth and falsehood must always be discussed in relation to the interior world of the work, with its own fictional reality, and not in accordance with the exterior one, which corresponds with the observed reality. This approach corresponds to the philosophical concept of “possible worlds”, which has been used by literary critics such as Marie-Laure Ryan, Lubomír Doležel, and Thomas Pavel in order to explain various literary issues, among which the idea of *fictionality*.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the matter of fictionality goes beyond the line of the narrative and also applies to the field of language. From a semantic view, a reader can recognize the linguistic signs and understand their meaning in the given context, but when it comes to enforcing these representations in his own reality, it is necessary for him to find referents from his exterior world in the world of the text.<sup>77</sup>

Benjamin Harshav discusses and categorizes these different worlds, in an attempt to separate “literary fictions” from “the external world upon which they are modeled”.<sup>78</sup> In this process, he talks about the importance of using “specific frames of reference” while judging the verity of a literary text, and he distinguishes between the Internal Field of Reference (IFR) and the External Field of Reference (EFR).<sup>79</sup> If the first one encompasses the world of the characters, settings, events etc., the second one corresponds to the real world that can be found within a precise historical context. According to the critic, a literary text has at least one IFR, which “is shaped according to various aspects of the physical, social, and human reality”<sup>80</sup>, and an EFR which mirrors the reader’s actualization of the text, therefore his own observed reality.

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<sup>74</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 64-5.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>76</sup> Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 19.

<sup>77</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 74.

<sup>78</sup> Benjamin Harshav, *Explorations in Poetics* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 77.



However, regardless of its resemblance to reality, the literary world will never be able to grasp the whole dimension of its referent, thus the autonomous character of the IFR which displays its own internal coherence in relation to the EFR.<sup>81</sup>

### **3.5.2.2. The stratum of a literary text**

The second principle adopted by Villanueva is closely bound to the theory of Ingarden on the structure of a literary work. As I have mentioned before in a previous paragraph, a literary text “consists of several heterogeneous layers that differ from one another in their specific material and function.”<sup>82</sup> If two of the strata are concerned with semantic units, phonetic and linguistic formations, the third one consists of the represented objects, which are in fact the projections of reality that undergo the reader’s actualization.<sup>83</sup> However, it is important to emphasize the fact that the textual representation is a rough outline of the observed reality, no matter how similar the two may seem. Thus any literary work displays “gaps or points or places of indeterminacy”<sup>84</sup> that need to be filled by the recipient in order for the text to transcend its condition as a mere schematic reproduction of reality. This schematic aspect of the text allows a free space within which the reader’s imagination can blossom.

The last of Ingarden’s layers is concerned exactly with this process of actualization, which the philosopher refers to as being the concretization of a work, and consists of the schematized aspects of a literary text.<sup>85</sup> Villanueva points out the dual function of these aspects: “on the one hand, they influence the way in which the objectivities are presented and, on the other hand, they provide specific aesthetic qualities.”<sup>86</sup> Thus in order for a literary work to reach its full potential, it is necessary for the reader to recognize and understand the linguistic signs, and to consciously actualize the represented objects, in this way connecting the world of the text with his own reality.

### **3.5.2.3. The dual nature of a literary text**

Villanueva points out the congruity of Harshav’s theory of fields of reference and Ingarden’s layers of a literary text, by overlapping the IFR with the layers of represented objects and the

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<sup>81</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p.79.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> George Alexander Kennedy and Raman Selden, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 297.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 296.

<sup>86</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 81.

aspects, and matching the EFR to the verbal stratum and the reader's "intentional projection on the text as a polyphonic whole."<sup>87</sup> At the same time, these approaches can also be linked to the third principle of literary phenomenology, which is concerned with the dual nature of a literary text, or what Ingarden considers to be the artistic and the aesthetic aspect of a work.<sup>88</sup> According to the Polish philosopher, the text in its basic state is an artistic object. However, it can reach the condition of an aesthetic object through the actualization that the reader offers to the work. The recipient has to use his imagination in order to apprehend the intention of the author and transform the uni-dimensional, schematized world of the text into a pluri-dimensional one; he is faced with the task of assigning meaning to linguistic signs and correlating the resulting images with his own observed reality.<sup>89</sup> During this process of concretization, if the language layer might not represent an obstacle, the semantic stratum might pose some difficulties for the reader, as it carries the writer's intention within it. Thus it is crucial for the author to embed the correct projection of the observed reality into the semantic layer, in order for the recipient to actualize the text as close to the author's experience as possible.<sup>90</sup>

#### **3.5.2.4. The mechanism of *epoché***

If initially, the text is born from the author's personal interpretation of the world, once it gets published and it reaches the general public, the work is exposed to individual interpretations that may or may not follow the writer's intentionality. This approach comprises one of the essential grounds of intentional realism, as it relies on the figure of the reader who is empowered to define the work according to his own perception of reality. From an ontological point of view, when the recipient is faced with a literary text, his consciousness, which functions as the main mechanism to distinguish between the real world and the imaginary one, deliberately transforms that literary image into reality.<sup>91</sup> However, in order for the reader to detach from his daily routine and emerge into the world of the novel, he must willingly suspend his contact with the observed reality and instate the author's perception instead. This process corresponds to a practice that the Greeks denominated as *epoché*, and which has its roots in Husserl's phenomenological reduction.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 82.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>92</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 53.

When applied to literature, the principle of *epoché* can be translated through Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief"<sup>93</sup>, a formula that reflects the reader's stance toward the literary text. By following the principle of *epoché*, the recipient identifies the situations that are presented in the novel as being genuine, without necessarily verifying their authenticity with historical facts, as continuously doubting every scene is tiring and neutralizes the artistic effect of the text. The suspension of disbelief comes naturally for the unskilled reader, who accepts the text as being realistic, without necessarily restricting it to his observed reality. Villanueva discusses the stages of an intentional realist reading and identifies *epoché* as being its first phase, along with the reader's involvement into the fictional world and its identification with the characters, the loss of the pre-reading epistemological attitude and the fusion of the represented world with the reader's own reality.<sup>94</sup>

Although the writer cannot control the process of actualization in a direct manner, he can influence the reader's response in various forms. Thus sometimes the author does not pretend to openly communicate his experience to the recipient of the text; rather he does it by creating another speaker who delivers the speech on his behalf. In this way, the reader is faced with the discourse of a fictitious character and not with that of a real person, hence facilitating the process of *epoché*.<sup>95</sup> However, there are elements that cannot be predicted by any reader-response theory and which can distort the reception of the literary text. One of these factors is the emotional response of the reader, which is in close connection with his cognitive reaction, as he needs to firstly understand the objectified reality in order to empathize with it. Therefore he must rationalize the narrative, before he can start building a deeper awareness of the facts.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, by focusing only on the genuine aspect of a literary text, the recipient can cancel all of its constituting elements, such as the stylistic effect of the language or the writer's intentionality.<sup>97</sup> Another important factor that interferes with the actualization of the literary text is the background of the reader, since reading is not only an individual act, but also a cultural construction, thus the essence of the literary work is not only enclosed in the text, but it is also built within the reader's experience.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 53.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>96</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 108.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>98</sup> Habib, p. 733.

### 3.5.3. Reception theory

Stanley Fish discusses the importance of institutions and societies in the process of reading, and launches the concept of *interpretative communities*. Interpretative communities are groups of readers who are familiar to literary conventions and whose perception and aesthetic awareness are not idiosyncratic, but socially constructed; they depend heavily on the assumptions of the social group to which they belong to.<sup>99</sup> Thus the actualization of the text relies not only on the personal experience of the reader, but also on the background in which he has been instructed and the values and beliefs that he has adopted as his own. Fish's theory cancels the writer's authority as far as the interpretation of the text is concerned, and reduces it to the degree of intentionality. However, the author has the choice to write for a "perfect reader", a hypothetical recipient who can actualize the text according to the writer's intentionality. It is the case of Wolfgang Iser's *implied reader*, a combination of the props that the author inserts in the work in order to guide the recipient towards a pre-established concept of reality, and the actual interpretation of the text, which may or may not follow those hints.<sup>100</sup>

Iser situates the literary work somewhere between the text and its actualization<sup>101</sup>, two different elements that correspond to Ingarden's classification of a text as an artistic object and an aesthetic one. The existence of an implied reader is favored by the amount of details that can be found in a literary text. Hence the more accurate and comprehensive a description is, the easier it is for the potential reader to understand the author's intention and emerge into the objectified world, by following the pre-established reading pattern that had been traced in the moment of the text's creation.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, the realistic effect of the text is not necessarily achieved through an accurate representation of reality, but by means of recreating the effect of reality, including guiding the reader towards a certain interpretation of the text.<sup>103</sup>

### 3.6. Conclusion

In his *Theories of Literary Realism*, Villanueva manages to approach the long disputed question of literary realism from the perspective of the reader's reception of the text, but also

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<sup>99</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 111.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>101</sup> Habib, p. 724.

<sup>102</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 132.

<sup>103</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 126.

from a phenomenological and pragmatic point of view. The critic considers that “realism is one of the central issues of literary theory”<sup>104</sup>, and distances himself from the essentialist view, by situating the production of the realistic effect in the hands of the reader, and not of the creator of the text. However, he rejects the existence of a “realist language” or a “realist reality”, and prefers to address instead the question of the intentional realist reading and the role of the reader in the process of producing the effect of reality.<sup>105</sup>

The following chapter will discuss the means through which the effect of reality is achieved in hysterical realist novels, in order to determine the reason why these books fail to convince the reader of their truthfulness, despite of having fulfilled the condition of verisimilitude within the world of their narrative. While doing so, I will apply Villanueva’s concept of intentional realism and its correspondent principles and theories that I have addressed in this chapter, to Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

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<sup>104</sup> Villanueva, 1997, p. 145.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

## 4. The effect of reality in hysterical realism

### 4.1. Introduction

The present chapter will study the different manners of achieving the effect of reality in hysterical realist novels, by taking into consideration Darío Villanueva's concept of intentional realism, together with the literary theories that subscribe to this branch of the realism genre. I will discuss the corpus in close connection to the four principles of intentional realism that I have debated in the first chapter of this study, by referring to aspects such as the process of *epoché*, the possibility of achieving a realist actualization of the text, the dual nature of a work or the intentionality of the author.

The main question I will try to answer is "Why do hysterical narratives fail to convince the readers of their credibility, regardless of the fact that their stories fulfill the condition of verisimilitude?". In this process, I will consider some of the main theories that govern the production of intentional realist works, such as the possible worlds theory or Harshav's theory of fields of reference, and apply them to a corpus of hysterical realist novels, that consists of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In my analysis, I will examine the relation between the fictional universe of the text and the real world, by commenting on the way in which the authors use facts from their observed reality in order to build a valid structure for their narratives. At the same time, I will also debate the issue of character construction and its direct influence on the realist actualization of the literary work.

### 4.2. The hysterical realist novel

While reviewing Smith's latest novel, *White Teeth*, the English critic James Wood classifies it as being part of a new literary genre, which he deftly denominates *hysterical realism*.<sup>106</sup> The label refers to a wider range of contemporary writings that have stirred a lot of controversies in the literary world in the past few decades, having conquered the book scene with their consideration to the most minor details, the plausible absurdity of the depicted situations, the playfulness of the narrative voice and their accurate portrayal of human emotions. The critique discusses the rise of a new novel which Wood calls "big" and "ambitious", with "stories and sub-stories sprouting on every page"<sup>107</sup>; a novel that impresses

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<sup>106</sup> James Wood, *James Woods' Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian "Hysterical Realism"*.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

through its rich web of episodes, but which fails in convincing the reader of its trustworthiness. The author also traces the beginnings of this new genre, going back as far as Dickens and his realistic portrayal of reality, and continuing with authors such as Thomas Pynchon or Don Delillo, which he designates as being the founders of hysterical realism.

Wood associates the new genre with magic realism, from which it acquires various traits, adapting them to its own use. However, the critic also signals the particularities of the style, with a special emphasis on the representation of the characters, dedicating a full chapter to explaining the principles that lie behind the process of constructing the protagonists of the contemporary novel. Hysterical realist works exhibit characters without emotional depth that go through so many life-changing events, that they lose their credibility as possible beings. Their humanly features, which initially recommend them as realistic individuals, wear out as they get involved into the spider web of events, until all that is left is an unconvincing caricature of a character who will never be able to overcome its fictitious condition. Instead of focusing on the development of the characters, the spotlight falls on the quantity of happenings and their interconnectedness. Therefore the novel becomes somehow septic, as the reader does not sympathize with the events, simply because he does not manage to establish an emotional connection with its protagonists.

#### **4.3. Possible worlds theory**

The review was published in July 2000 in *The New Republic magazine*, a liberal American publication that tackles political and cultural issues. The overall tone of the article is a negative one, as it criticizes postmodernist novels for the way they negotiate the main principles of realism. Jeffrey Steiger explains Wood's preoccupation with respecting the verisimilitude principle that dominates any realist work, and ascribes it to a pragmatic point of view. When it comes to manners of achieving the realist effect in literature, the critic insists on the credibility of the text, rather than the authenticity of the depicted facts: "realism becomes as much a matter of persuasion as verisimilitude".<sup>108</sup> Thus the sense of authenticity is more bound to the actualization of a literary text, rather than to its historical truthfulness. This theory moves the focalization point from a genetic perspective to an intentional one,

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<sup>108</sup> Jeffrey Steiger, 'James Wood's Case Against "Hysterical Realism" and Thomas Pynchon', *The Antioch Review*, 66, no.4 (2008), pp. 634-654 (p.636).

shifting the spotlight towards the role of the reader in the production of reality: “a work is realistic, then, if it is intense or vivid or ample enough to get us to believe in it.”<sup>109</sup>

At the same time, this perspective inscribes within the “possible worlds” theory of critics such as Marie-Laure Ryan, Lubomír Doležel and Thomas Pavel, who have employed this hypothesis for “distinguishing fictive from other (e.g. historical and scientific) kinds of text” while at the same time “drawing generic distinctions between various modes of fictive discourse.”<sup>110</sup> The concept of possible worlds situates the production of reality within the internal field of the text, stepping away from the traditional perspective of the realist novel as “a truthful, accurate, and objective representation of the real world”.<sup>111</sup> By loosening the ties between reality and the realistic effect of the literary work, the theory demonstrates the fact that fulfilling the condition of authenticity is not sufficient; as sometimes plausible episodes can compose themselves into an implausible narrative. Thus in order for a work to receive a realist actualization, its fictional universe must respect what Ruth Ronen denominates as being “a correspondence theory of truth”, which stipulates the fact that the “truth value of propositions is determined by a corresponding state of affairs obtained in the world.”<sup>112</sup> This autonomous aspect of the fictional world grants the author a certain freedom when it comes to the nature of the presented facts; however the effect of reality can be lost if the narrative does not attain “a certain coherence and continuity that can be explained by invoking the principle of causality.”<sup>113</sup> In order for the reader to emerge into the world of the narrative, he must find common referents between his actual reality and the universe of the text<sup>114</sup>, a task that can turn out to be difficult in some situations, as some literary worlds defy the laws of logic which govern our whole existence.

#### **4.3.1. The effect of reality in *White Teeth***

The majority of hysterical realist texts choose to build their internal worlds by following the fundamentals of logic and reality, sometimes incorporating within their narratives real historical events, bringing the reader in genuine time and spatial coordinates. But however close to reality they might be, these stories fail to convince the reader of their truthfulness.

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<sup>109</sup> Steiger, p. 636.

<sup>110</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 463.

<sup>111</sup> Habib, p. 471.

<sup>112</sup> Ronen, p. 35.

<sup>113</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Parallel Universes* (May 2006) <<http://www.univ-paris-diderot.fr/clam/seminaires/RyanEN.htm>> [accessed 20 May 2015].

<sup>114</sup> Villanueva, p. 74.



Wood denounces the reasons for this divergent situation and assigns them to “an overuse of reality”.<sup>115</sup> According to the critic, these works fail to convince their recipients due to their excessive use of the realist principles, which may seem paradoxical in the beginning, but it does truly add to the annulment of the realistic effect.

Smith designs the fictional world of *White Teeth* according to the guidelines of a realist writing by presenting reasonable situations, which could be transferable to the observed reality of the reader. Her discourse adheres to the laws of logic, enacting its narrative with the prospect of historical applicability. Nevertheless, the overall effect of reality does not convince the typical reader, who cannot help but feel misled into accepting the possibility of integrating an improbable world into its own authentic context. The following fragment is representative for the given matter and it illustrates the manner in which the author constructs her entire narrative:

Archie liked track cycling, he was consistently good at it and it proved him with the only truly great memory he had. In 1948, Archie Jones had participated in the Olympics in London, sharing thirteenth place (62.8 seconds) with a Swedish gynaecologist called Horst Ibelgauf. Unfortunately this fact had been omitted from the Olympic records by a sloppy secretary who returned one morning after a coffee break with something else on her mind and missed his name as she transcribed one list to another piece of paper. Madam Posterity stuck Archie down the arm of the sofa and forgot about him. His only proof that the event had taken place at all were the periodic letters and notes he had received over the years from Ibelgauf himself.<sup>116</sup>

The scene offers a glimpse of Archie’s past and exposes a new facet of the character, which seems to appear in contradiction with his actual situation (a man who refuses to overcome his mediocre condition). The author offers an explanation as to why Archie had reach his current status, by exonerating the man of any blame and ascribing it to the will of “Madam Posterity”, instead. Smith manages to escape the burden of offering the reader a valid justification by tying the destiny of the character to an outer incontrollable force, a process that involves a “suspension of the laws of nature”<sup>117</sup>, thus situating the events outside the field of logic and the explicable. This approach corresponds to Villanueva’s process of *epoché*, as discussed in the previous chapter of this paper.

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<sup>115</sup> Wood, James Woods’ *Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian “Hysterical Realism”*.

<sup>116</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin UK, 2001), p. 15-16.

<sup>117</sup> Waugh, p. 461.

However, regardless of her efforts to recreate a faithful representation of the “the social configuration and racial make-up”<sup>118</sup> of current day London, her narrative does not seem to convince the contemporary reader of its plausibility. The reason for the disruption of the realist effect originates in the way in which *White Teeth*’s fictional events compose into global happenings. Taken individually, each of the given facts counts with the benefit of being authentic and the possibility of having happened at some point in a possible parallel world, which can exist “independently of the human mind”<sup>119</sup> and the reader’s own actual universe. One can notice the fact that each of these happenings is authentic in its own world, however, when combining all these facts into a coherent narrative, they fail to deliver a realistic fallout. The fact that Archie would have participated in the Olympics is credible on its own, as the event is an historical fact that the recipient can authenticate within his own reality. On a further inspection, the reader can find out that there was indeed a track cycling trial in the Summer Olympics that took place in London in 1948, however the historical records do not confirm the existence of a real individual called Horst Ibelgauf to have participated in the competition.<sup>120</sup>

Smith builds this episode on the foundations of authentic spatial coordinates, using the real world as a playground for her characters, and she interweaves reality with other possible fictional worlds: one in which a Swedish gynaecologist would win the 13<sup>th</sup> place in an Olympic track cycling race, and another one in which human error would cost an athlete an Olympic title. Despite of their individual probability of occurrence in their own parallel worlds, these episodes form a narrative that strikes the reader as being improbable, lacking the principle of credibility. The reader actualizes the text by filtering it through his own observed reality and notices the incongruity of the ensemble of facts that “infringe logic, but present imaginable worlds all the same.”<sup>121</sup> At the same time, Smith offers her readers a subtle indication of the point where fiction intervenes in the realist narrative, by alternating verifiable historical events with improbable ones. Wood denounces this literary practice and traces it back to Aristotle’s thought on achieving the realist effect: “This is what Aristotle means when he says that in storytelling ‘an convincing impossibility’ (say, a man levitating)

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<sup>118</sup> Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, ‘Ethnic Cartographies of London in Bernadine Evaristo and Zadie Smith’, *European Journal of English Studies*, 8, no.2 (2004), pp. 173-188 (p. 174).

<sup>119</sup> Marie Laure-Ryan, ‘Possible Worlds and Accessibility Relations: A Semantic Typology of Fiction’, *Poetics Today*, 12, no. 3 (1991), pp. 553-576 (p. 554).

<sup>120</sup> Official Website of the Olympic Movement, *Cycling Track* [n.d.], <http://www.olympic.org/cycling-track> [accessed 20th of May 2015]

<sup>121</sup> Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Parallel Universes*.

is always preferable to ‘an unconvincing possibility’ (say, the possibility that a fundamentalist group in London would continue to call itself Kevin).”<sup>122</sup> In the case of the previous paragraph, the fact that a former athlete would fail to receive the accreditation of its Olympic achievement due to a bureaucratic mistake can be considered to be “an unconvincing possibility”, thus interrupting the actualization of the literary text as a realist one, which constitutes one of the main principles of any intentional realist writing.

The episode comprises a considerable amount of details, which at first glance seem to help build what Roland Barthes refers to as the effect of reality of the narrative.<sup>123</sup> However, on a closer investigation, the reader realizes that some of this information holds no significance in the development of the action, acting as simple props in recreating the narrator’s observed reality. Considering the previous paragraph, the information that the narrator delivers to the reader as to the exact time in which Archie finished the race “(62.8 seconds)” has no relevance in the construction of the action and its omission would not affect the overall understanding of the episode. However, in terms of Barthes’ theory of the effect of reality, the detail is considered to carry a meaning on its own, regardless of the function that it accomplishes in the context of real life. Thus according to the French critic, the “having-been-there of things is a sufficient principle of speech”<sup>124</sup>, especially in the context of literary realism, where the insignificant details function as agents of delivering the realist effect of the narrative. On the other hand, the fact that the information is given in between parentheses reinforces its inutility within the narratorial discourse and interrupts the fluidity of the process of actualization, in this way distracting the reader’s attention from the information that is truly significant for explaining the events. Wood considers this technique as a direct result of “an overuse of reality”<sup>125</sup> and identifies it as an inherent feature of all hysterical realist works.

#### **4.4. The internal and external fields of reference**

Benjamin Harshav developed the possible worlds theory even further on, by emphasizing the discrepancy between the universe of fiction and reality. According to the critic, each literature work displays its own “network of interrelated referents of various kinds: characters, events, situations, ideas, dialogues, etc.”<sup>126</sup>, which comprises its Internal Fields of

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<sup>122</sup> Wood, *James Woods’ Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian “Hysterical Realism”*.

<sup>123</sup> See Section 3.4.1.

<sup>124</sup> Barthes, p. 147.

<sup>125</sup> See note n. 115.

<sup>126</sup> Benjamin Harshav, ‘The Construction of Reality in Fiction’, *Poetics Today*, 5, no.2 (1984), pp.227-251 (p. 230).

Reference (IFR), while at the same time relying on “the real world in time and space, history, a philosophy, ideologies, view of human nature, other texts.”<sup>127</sup> The latter refers to the External Fields of Reference (EFR); a crucial component in the construction of any realist text, as it offers a skeleton structure upon which fictional facts can flourish. Regardless of their place of creation (be it the world of fiction or the observed reality), the two types of fields share a common configuration, encompassing what Harshav denominates as being *frames of references* (fr): “any semantic continuum of two or more referents that we may speak about; it may be a scene in time and space, a character, an ideology, a mood, a state of affairs, a plot (...) etc.”<sup>128</sup> Depending on their nature and the connections that they establish between them, these frames of reference can form Fields of Reference (FR), larger worlds that can accommodate a wide variety of *frs*.<sup>129</sup>

#### 4.4.1. The effect of reality in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Harshav’s model lends a helping hand to establish the boundary between reality and fiction, a controversial matter that continues to afflict the world of literary theory even today. The critic offers a valuable tool in revealing the production of the realist effect, by “admitting the input of both external and textual information”<sup>130</sup>, while at the same time tracing an imaginary line between the autonomous worlds of the text and the historical truth. In terms of Villanueva’s realist actualization of the literary work, the distinction between the IFR and EFR facilitates this process, in terms of reinforcing or invalidating the narrative’s ability of conveying credible facts. This tool proves to be a valuable one while investigating why hysterical realist narratives seem to be improbable, despite of respecting the principle of verisimilitude. I will use a fragment from Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in order to illustrate the point in which the realist effect disrupts, causing the narrative to fall into the sphere of the incredible. In the following scene, the narrator recounts the tragic family story of one of the main characters, Belicia Cabral, commenting upon each of their kin’s terrible death within the context of what he calls *fukú*, “generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p.243.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p.230.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>130</sup> Lilian R. Furst, *Through the Lens of the Reader: Explorations of European Narrative* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 128.

<sup>131</sup> Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), p. 1.

Her sister, Astrid – we scarcely knew you, babe – wasn’t much luckier. In 1951, while praying in a church in San Juan, where she lived with her tíos, a stray bullet flew down the aisle and struck her in the back of the head, killing her instantly. No one knew where the bullet had come from. No one even recalled hearing a weapon discharge.<sup>132</sup>

The author models the text’s IFR by borrowing referents or frames of reference from exterior fields, such as a temporal indications (the year 1951) or authentic spatial coordinates (the city of San Juan). The whole scene is constructed upon the foundations of “a referential grounding”<sup>133</sup>, a technique which implies the appropriation of an authentic element and incorporating it into the world of fiction.<sup>134</sup> In this case, the narrator locates the fictitious universe of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in the historical city of San Juan, yet he does not mention the precise moment of the events or the name of the church where the accident occurred, leaving the episode within “floating coordinates”<sup>135</sup>, outside the limits of a historical time and space. This literary practice facilitates the process of *epoché*<sup>136</sup>, by giving the reader the liberty of actualizing the text within his own observed reality, without restraining it to a fixed chronological moment. Floating coordinates leave space for “an intersection between the world of the text and the world of the listener or the reader.”<sup>137</sup>

In order to analyze the realistic fallout of the episode and the impact it had on the reader, I will consider the frame of reference *fr1* as being the church in the city of San Juan, at an indefinite moment of the year 1951. At the same time, the narrator introduces another *fr* that I will denominate *fr2*, which corresponds to the event depicting the death of the character (which on its own stands as an independent frame of reference *fr3*). All of these frames compose into a generic field of reference *FR* that forms part of the global IFR of the novel. The realist effect of the text relies on the truth value of the propositions presented in the *FR*<sup>138</sup>, but always in a close connection to the other information that the reader receives from the same field. Thus any inconsistency on the level of textual discourse might lead to an annulment of the realist actualization of the work. In the case of the previous fragment, each of its frames of reference holds the benefit of plausibility, including *fr2*, which might seem

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<sup>132</sup> Díaz, p. 249-50.

<sup>133</sup> Furst, 1992, p. 128.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>135</sup> Harshav, p. 244.

<sup>136</sup> See Section 3.5.2.4.

<sup>137</sup> Villanueva, p. 76.

<sup>138</sup> Harshav, p. 230.

incompatible to the laws of logic. However, considered within the context of the text's IFR, the event does not struck the reader as being impossible because it is part of a larger series of happenings that take place under the power of *fukú*<sup>139</sup>. By assigning these deaths to an external non-explicable cause (the terrifying course that runs among various generations of Dominicans, ever since colonial times), the narrator absolves himself from the task of offering a logical explanation to the sudden deaths of the characters. Nevertheless, at the time of actualization, the reader finds it difficult to correlate the episode with his own reality, as the possibility of being killed by a drifting bullet is a very remote one, especially within the context of a religious venue. Within his own observed reality, the reader hesitates to associate the violent act of a shooting with the sacred space of a church, regardless of the event's validity within the IFR of the novel. At the same time, the narrator does not offer any other details that might clarify the situation; instead he emphasizes the absurdity of the episode, by offering a second perspective of the people who have witnessed the whole event. The double use of the indefinite pronoun "no one" reinforces the inconceivable aspect of the occurrence, and simultaneously creates a new frame of reference *fr4* (the reality of the witnesses, in which the possibility of such an event would also defy the laws of logic).

Overall, the various frames of reference of the scene (*fr1*, *fr2*, *fr3*, *f4*) compose into a *FR* that follows the guidelines of rational sense within the IFR of the novel; however they do not comply with the laws of logic that govern the reader's own reality.<sup>140</sup> Thus abiding the condition of truthfulness does not suffice to achieve the realist effect, because its authenticity only functions within the fictional field of the narrative and it cannot be integrated by the reader within his own field of reference. Wood comments upon the manner in which hysterical realist texts use the principle of verisimilitude in order to appeal to their recipients as being true, while at the same time failing to convince them that they could also have practical appliance outside the literary sphere. The critic blames this inconsistency on the ethicality of the narrative and considers it the result of "overusing" the principles of realist writing: "objections are not made at the level of verisimilitude, but at the level of morality: this style of writing is not to be faulted because it lacks reality- the usual charge against botched realism- but because it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> See note n. 113.

<sup>140</sup> Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Parallel Universes*.

<sup>141</sup> Wood, *James Woods' Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian "Hysterical Realism"*.

#### 4.5. The function of the characters

So far, I have considered the production of the realist effect by taking into account the internal world of the text; analyzing the congruency and separation points between fiction and reality, in two different scenes from the chosen corpus of novels. I have demonstrated the fact that the effect of reality is not necessarily conditioned by the verisimilitude of the narrative, but rather by the “strict principle of internal coherence for all its elements.”<sup>142</sup> However, there is another decisive factor in the process of achieving the realist actualization of a text, which is affiliated to the world of the characters and the dynamic that they establish between them. Lennard J. Davis observes the essential function that characters play in the concretization of a text, and considers them an absolute condition for the successful realization of any reading act: “it is difficult if not impossible to follow any novel if one constantly bears in mind that a character is a totally fabricated construct.”<sup>143</sup>

Wood also debates the question of the character in his extended essay *How Fiction Works* (2008), where he erases the boundaries between real people and literary constructions; a choice that he motivates by pointing out the lack of a standardized theory that might differentiate between different types of fictitious individuals, as far as their literary function is concerned: “There is no such thing as ‘a novelistic character’. There are just thousands of different kinds of people, some round, some flat, some deep, some caricatures, some realistically evoked, some brushed in with the lightest of strokes.”<sup>144</sup> The issue of the character’s fictionality turns out to be even more obscure in the circumstance of the realist novel, where protagonists are faced with situations that obey the laws of plausibility, thus recommending them as possible human beings with authentic emotions. But characters have the power to represent more than human nature and psychology, as they are intrinsically bound to the events of the novel, to the point that “what they say and do in fact constitutes the action.”<sup>145</sup> On the other hand, they can perform the role of the narrator, bringing their personal perspective upon the represented facts, or act as “facilitators of the action.”<sup>146</sup> Due to their variable function, it is important to consider the role of the characters in the context of

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<sup>142</sup> Villanueva, p. 136.

<sup>143</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels (Routledge Revivals): Ideology and Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p.102.

<sup>144</sup> James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), p. 106.

<sup>145</sup> Geir Farnen, *Literary Fiction: The Ways We Read Narrative Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2014), p. 156.

<sup>146</sup> Dennis Walder, *The Realist Novel* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 13.

hysterical realist narratives, especially when it comes to revealing their function in achieving the realist effect of the work.

#### **4.5.1. Hysterical realist characters**

The case of hysterical realist novels is particularly interesting in this matter, due to the quantity of characters that they incorporate within their narratives, and the manner in which they facilitate the production of the effect of reality. In his critical review *Human, All Too Inhuman*, Wood denounces the practices of the new literary genre, with a main emphasis on the issue of the characters. The title of the critique announces one of the basic features of the hysterical realist novel, which has to do with the inhumanity of its protagonists and their failure to represent real human beings. The main reason for this discrepancy is not necessarily connected to the construction of the characters and their plausibility outside the world of fiction, but to the fact that they “clothe real people who could never actually endure the stories that happen to them.”<sup>147</sup> Thus the possibility of actualizing them in a realist manner is cancelled on a level of morality, and not as a result of developing some unconvincing personalities.

#### **4.5.2. Interconnectedness**

In order to compensate for their inhumanity, the hysterical realist author incorporates his characters into a complicated web of events, which distracts the reader from a deeper understanding of their human nature. Wood observes that in this type of narratives the interconnectedness of the stories comes first, while the development of the characters is left in a second place: “since the characters in these novels are not really alive, not fully human, their connectedness can only be insisted on. Indeed, the reader begins to think that it is being insisted on precisely because they do not really exist.”<sup>148</sup> Thus hysterical realist characters seem to live for the sole purpose of facilitating the action of the novel, and not as autonomous individuals that represent human beings, with distinct personalities. Steiger identifies this literary practice as being a common technique of the postmodern novel, and denounces the shallow way in which their characters are built by “hastening from one extravagant incident to the next without taking time to flesh out the human beings to whom and in whom the events could have meaning.”<sup>149</sup> Indeed, postmodern authors appear to evade from the realist

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<sup>147</sup> Wood, James Woods’ *Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian “Hysterical Realism”*.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Steiger, p. 639.



task of portraying “an individual in a changing world confronting personal and communal crises”<sup>150</sup>, in this way disregarding the writing conventions of the genre.

Díaz reinforces these postmodern literary techniques in the narrative of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, where he prefers to concentrate on the circumstances that facilitate a certain episode, rather than on the feelings of the characters and their reactions when confronted with the given facts. The following fragment illustrates this constant avoidance of revealing the character’s psychological depth, which can be found in all hysterical realist novels:

The next week two atomic eyes opened over civilian centers in Japan and, even though no one knew it yet, the world was then remade. Not two days after the atomic bombs scared Japan forever, Socorro dreamed that the faceless man was standing over her husband’s bed, and she could not scream, could not say anything, and then the next night she dreamed that he was standing over her children too. (...) In Santiago, Abelard is kissing Lydia’s hands and she is sighing with pleasure and already we’re heading for Victory in the Pacific and for three Secret Police officers in their shiny Chevrolet winding up the road to Abelard’s house.<sup>151</sup>

In the given paragraph, the narrator tells the story of Abelard’s unexpected imprisonment, due to obscure political reasons that will remain unknown to the reader and the character alike, for the whole course of the story. The whole episode is built upon authentic historical coordinates (the famous atomic bombings from the end of the Second World War), which accomplish two different functions within the structure of the narrative: they help situate the world of the novel within an authentic temporal framework (August 1945), while at the same time providing an explanation for the following events. The narrator uses the interconnectivity between real and fictitious happenings in order to provide an excuse for the incarceration of Abelard, focusing on the social and political climate of the time, rather than on the “drama of his consciousness.”<sup>152</sup> By silencing the character’s emotions at a crucial moment of his existence, the author manages to reduce its role to that of a subject of the action, nothing more than “a product of discourse.”<sup>153</sup> This practice affects the realist

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<sup>150</sup> Richard Daniel Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition* (Madison: Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 251.

<sup>151</sup> Díaz, p. 236-7.

<sup>152</sup> Steiger, p. 649.

<sup>153</sup> Aleid Fokkema, *Postmodern Characters: A Study of Characterization in British and American Postmodern Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), p. 13.

actualization of the text in a direct way, as it fails to convince the reader of the possibility of Abelard's displacement from the fictional world to the real one, chiefly because characters of his kind serve more as instruments for creating narrative episodes than main protagonists with dynamic personalities.

Hysterical realist novels step away from the conventions of realism, in the sense that they do not try to "fool the reader into an illusion of life, into an emotional involvement in character."<sup>154</sup> Therefore they do not need to develop round protagonists, with complex psychological profiles and human attitudes. On the other hand, Steiger signals the fact that these characters are not mere caricatures of real human beings, regardless of being defined through "their prime desires and obsessions, some comic, some zanny, but most just strange".<sup>155</sup> Wood clarifies the issue by stating that all of these characters are "real", yet in different ways, depending on the reader's expectations and the actualization of the text.<sup>156</sup> Thus the effect of reality does not necessarily rely strictly on the construction of the character, as it revolves around a larger number of variables, such as the author's intention, the internal coherence of the narrative or the reader's identification with the protagonist.<sup>157</sup>

In the following paragraphs I will analyze the way in which Smith introduces the reader to one of *White Teeth*'s most prominent protagonists, Clara Bowden. The fragment is representative from the point of view of the construction of the character, as it illustrates some of the literary tools that prevail in hysterical realist novels, such as direct characterization, an open attitude towards the reader and an ironic, but at the same time moralistic narratorial voice.

But Archie did not pluck Clara Bowden from a vacuum. And it's about time people told the truth about beautiful women. They do not shimmer down staircases. They do not descend, as was once supposed, from on high, attached to nothing other than wings. Clara was *from* somewhere. She had *roots*. More specifically, she was from Lamberth (via Jamaica) and she was connected, through tacit adolescent agreement, to one Ryan Topps. Because before Clara was beautiful she was ugly. And before

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<sup>154</sup> Rolf Lunden, 'American Fiction Today', *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 10 (1978), pp. 65-72 (p. 70).

<sup>155</sup> Steiger, p. 649.

<sup>156</sup> Wood, 2008, p. 120.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

there was Clara and Archie there was Clara and Ryan. And there is no getting away from Ryan Topps.<sup>158</sup>

After having previously presented the casual encounter between Clara and Archie, the narrator comes back on the matter and decides to give the reader more information on Clara Bowden's background. As I have mentioned before, the character plays an important role in the development of the novel, thus it seems only natural for the author to develop it by providing extra information about its origins, together with a physical and moral description. However, the reader quickly understands that the incursion into Clara's past is not only a way of revealing her personality, but also the perfect excuse to insert another episode and introduce new protagonists, in this way creating the complicated web of events that every hysterical realist novel proudly displays.<sup>159</sup> The direct warning which the narrator addresses to the recipient "there is no getting away from Ryan Topps" reveals the fact that he has no power over the characters, who seem to move freely and to design their own destinies. Even Ryan Topps, a minor character from Clara's adolescence who holds no relevance to the main plot of the novel, has the ability to materialize towards the end of the story and meet Clara's daughter, Irie.

#### **4.5.3. A new model of characters**

The hysterical realist author enables his protagonists with the power to follow their own path inside the narrative, without tying them to a specific function within the plot; in this way creating the impression that they "exist for their own sake, not as a vehicle for whatever ideas about the world the author wants to register".<sup>160</sup> This tendency inscribes within the principles of the postmodern novel, where the character "is construed exclusively as a subject in discourse"<sup>161</sup>, and not as a protagonist which could be described in E. M. Forster's now classical critical terms of "round" or "flat"<sup>162</sup>. However, regardless of the employed terminology, the postmodernist models of characters seem to constantly negotiate the boundaries between fiction and reality, by doubting their own existence and function within

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<sup>158</sup> Smith, p. 27. (author's emphasis)

<sup>159</sup> Wood, *James Woods' Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian "Hysterical Realism"*.

<sup>160</sup> Steiger, p. 636.

<sup>161</sup> Fokkema, p. 14.

<sup>162</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2010), p. 48.

the novel.<sup>163</sup> This practice affects the realist actualization of the text in a direct way, as the reader is faced with protagonists “who are at once real and unreal.”<sup>164</sup>

By openly questioning the existence of its characters, the author plays with the reader’s perception, interrupting his “willing suspension of disbelief”<sup>165</sup> that guarantees a primary realistic interpretation of the events. Thus the recipient is faced with a conflicting situation, where he has to interpret the characters as being authentic in order to be able to enter the world of the novel, while at the same time being constantly reminded of the fact that they are just fictional representations of human beings: “And in a fine paradox, it is precisely such reflection [n.r. on fictionality] that stirs in the reader a desire to make these fictional characters “real,” to say, in effect, to the authors: “I know that they are only fictional—you keep on suggesting this. But I can only know them by treating them as real.”<sup>166</sup> Smith employs this technique while unfolding many of her characters, including the figure of Clara, which she firstly introduces as a sort of goddess: “she walked down the stairs in slow motion, surrounded by afterglow and fuzzy lighting”<sup>167</sup>, only to deconstruct her image afterwards, by appealing to the reader’s sense of reality: “It’s about time people told the truth about beautiful women. They do not shimmer down staircases.”<sup>168</sup> The unexpected moral lesson that the author delivers on the perception of beauty in the contemporary society disrupts the realist effect of the text and reinforces the fictionality of the character, as a mere literary representation of a human being. This mocking attitude towards the recipient can be found in all hysterical realist novels, as a way of protesting against the rigid rules of realist writings: “As realism, it is incredible; as satire, it is cartoonish; as cartoon, it is too realistic.”<sup>169</sup>

#### 4.6. Conclusion

Although hysterical realist novels depart from the basic precepts that govern any realist writing, their representation of the world steps away from the conventions of literary realism. This new perspective opens the discussion about the manner in which the effect of reality is accomplished, by constantly renegotiating the boundaries between fiction and the real world. The present chapter offers an inside look on the mechanisms that trigger the realistic fallout

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<sup>163</sup> Fokkema, p. 14.

<sup>164</sup> Wood, 2008, p. 108.

<sup>165</sup> Villanueva, p. 53.

<sup>166</sup> See note n. 164.

<sup>167</sup> Smith, p. 24.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>169</sup> Wood, *James Woods’ Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian “Hysterical Realism”*.

of this type of narrative, by analyzing two of the most representative hysterical realist narratives of the contemporary literature. The study discusses the issue of verisimilitude within the context of the internal world of the text, while at the same time considering its attachment to the observed reality of the reader. One of the main findings of the current analysis emphasizes the fact that the condition of truthfulness must be fulfilled not only within the individual episodes of the plot, but also on the global scale of the novel, as sometimes credible events compose into an incredible narrative. Hysterical realist novels play with the norms of reality, as they present a dense network of happenings which are plausible while considered individually, but at the same time infringe the laws of logic while taken as a whole. Thus the interruption of the effect of reality does not occur within the fictional world, but at the moment of the realist actualization of the text, when the reader fails to transfer the narrated facts to his own observed reality.

Hysterical realist authors insist on the credibility of their stories by displaying a solid narratorial consistency within the world of the novel, and this translates through the development of a complicated web of events that incorporates all the characters of the narrative. Indeed, these novels seem to consider the interconnectedness of the characters as their main goal, leaving the development of its protagonists into a second place, acting more as facilitators of the action, rather than complex portrayals of human beings. Thus the effect of “realness” of the characters is achieved through maintaining their consistency inside the universe of the novel, and not through their faithful representation of human personalities. However, the possibility of their displacement from the fictional world to the real one is not conditioned by their graphic nature, but rather by the credibility of the stories in which the characters get involved.

## 5. Hysterical realism and the contemporary novel

### 5.1. Introduction

The present chapter will consider the phenomenon of hysterical realist novels and their ideological roots, by focusing on how these narratives incorporate their vision of the world within their literary structure. I will demonstrate the fact that today's cultural tendencies have a powerful influence on the field of literature, where they are reflected through new literary manifestations. Hysterical realism is one of the newly emerged genres that respond to the constantly changing requirements of the modern reader, by playing with the principles of literary realism. In order to demonstrate the structural mutations that the hysterical realist novel proposes as a norm, I will refer to the two previously mentioned corpus of books by Zadie Smith and Junot Díaz. The analysis of their paratextual apparatus will reveal the new functions that these elements acquire in order support the novels' objective of informing the reader, by offering him an outlook on today's society.

### 5.2. A new form of the novel

James Wood's review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* published in *The New Republic* in 2000 took the literary scene by surprise, by coining a new term which denominates the big contemporary novel: hysterical realism.<sup>170</sup> The criticism was aimed at several contemporary authors, including Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon or David Foster Wallace, primarily to the manner in which these writers build their narratives. The critic considers that these writings fail to achieve "the novel's basic task of representing human beings"<sup>171</sup>, by focusing more on building thick plots and transmitting information, than creating dynamic multifaceted characters. Wood denounces the extravagance of the new novel, by emphasizing the narrative's high velocity, the great quantity of underdeveloped characters and their interconnectedness in the web-like story line, together with the excessive storytelling; all of these being symptoms that characterize a fair part of the recent corpus of American and British literature. But regardless of his passionate, yet thorough analysis of the new genre, the critic does not explain the possible arguments for adopting this style of writing, nor does he portray it by bearing in mind the latest cultural tendencies. The critique confines itself to

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<sup>170</sup> Wood, James Woods' Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian "Hysterical Realism".

<sup>171</sup> Lev Grossman, 'What Ever Happened to Hysterical Realism?', *Time*, 11 July 2012

<<http://entertainment.time.com/2012/07/11/what-ever-happened-to-hysterical-realism/>> [accessed 5 June 2015].

reflect on the future of hysterical realism, by launching the question: “Which way will the ambitious contemporary novel go?”<sup>172</sup>

One year later, in October 2001, the literary critic revisits his theory on hysterical realism in a new review for *The Guardian*, where he urges US writers to “abandon social and theoretical glitter”<sup>173</sup>, and focus on returning to the main objective of the novel; that is conveying authentic human emotions and attitudes. The title of the review *Tell me how does it feel?* announces its strong moralizing tone, as it discusses the new trajectory of American literature in the light of the tragic events of the September 11 attacks. Wood accuses the new generation of authors of following the Delilloan style of writing, uncovering their intention “to pin down an entire writhing culture, to be a great analyst of systems, crowds, paranoia, politics.”<sup>174</sup> Indeed, judging by the content of their works, contemporary novelists take their role of knowledge providers in a very serious manner, generating “books that know a thousand things but do not know a single human being”.<sup>175</sup> Smith acknowledges this ideological shift that affects the main objectives of fiction writing, but in opposition to Wood, she embraces the new current and attributes it to the constantly fluctuating demands of the general public. From her perspective, the novelist should be more concerned with explaining “how the world works”, rather than guiding the reader towards experiencing a certain set of emotions.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, Smith praises the ability of authors such as Dave Eggers or David Foster Wallace to possess certain know-how in a multitude of areas of interest, in this way complying with the world’s obsession of staying updated, in an age where information flows undisturbed through all mediums of communication:

These are guys who know a great deal about the world. They understand macro-microeconomics, the way the Internet works, math, philosophy, but... They're still people who know something about the street, about family, love, sex, whatever. That is an incredibly fruitful combination.<sup>177</sup>

Zadie Smith debates the future of the contemporary novel even further on in her *The New York Review of Books* critique of Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* and Tom McCarthy’s

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<sup>172</sup> Wood, James Woods’ Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian “Hysterical Realism”.

<sup>173</sup> James Wood, ‘Tell Me How Does It Feel?’, *The Guardian*, 6 October 2001  
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/06/fiction>> [accessed 5 June 2015].

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Liza Featherstone, ‘TALKING WITH ZADIE SMITH / Out of the Attic’, *Newsday*, 24 June 2000  
<<http://www.newsday.com/talking-with-zadie-smith-out-of-the-attic-1.486462>> [accessed 5 June 2015].

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

*Remainder*, where she advocates for a “non-representational literary form”<sup>178</sup>, in this way stepping away from the Stendhalian sense of the novel as a “mirror carried along a high road”.<sup>179</sup> The author shows her reticence to the contemporary applicability of one of the main principles of literary realism, stating that a focus on achieving a faithful portrayal of reality actually slows down the process of writing.<sup>180</sup> Her perspective finds itself in direct contradiction to Wood’s concept of the novel, and her arguments open the path towards a new model of narrative which focuses more on instigating the reader to challenge his way of thinking, rather than offering him an already filtered copy of reality. Holmes observes the novelist’s preoccupation with the structure of the contemporary novel, stressing the fact that “for Smith, the novel form must be for critics and novelists something ‘to know with’.”<sup>181</sup>

Junot Díaz, whose novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* has not escaped the label of hysterical realism, seems to share the same preoccupation for the contemporary novel’s limits of form. When asked about the reasons that lie behind choosing the book’s crumbled structure, the author situated the answer outside the sphere of literature, and plunged into a matter of present existentialism: “I’m a product of a fragmented world.”<sup>182</sup> The writer’s bold statement has serious implications, questioning the stability of one of the main pillars that sustain the dogma of literary realism: that novels should be a “mirror” of present-day reality, conveying facts as close to their real referents as possible. However, the rigid rules that realism imposes on the structure of the narrative do no longer suit the contemporary novel, who found various ways of going astray from the realist norms by merging with elements of the mainstream culture, in this way creating “unnatural, often unholy textual alliances which rather than orbit around tradition, tap into contemporary people’s decentralized experience of reality.”<sup>183</sup> The American-Dominican author reinforces the importance of staying truthful to the rapidly changing times, by emphasizing the direct effect of real facts on the fictional world:

Take a brief look at Dominican or Caribbean history and you’ll see that the structure of the book is more in keeping with the reality of this history than with its most

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<sup>178</sup> Holmes, p. 149.

<sup>179</sup> Stendhal, *The Red and the Black: Easyread Large Edition* (ReadHowYouWant.com, 2006), p. 313.

<sup>180</sup> Holmes, p. 147.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>182</sup> Meghan O’Rourke, ‘Questions for Junot Díaz’, *Slate*, 8 April 2008  
<[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/recycled/2008/04/questions\\_for\\_junot\\_daz.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/recycled/2008/04/questions_for_junot_daz.html)>  
[accessed 5 June 2015].

<sup>183</sup> Edyta Just and Marek Wojtaszek, *Esthetic Experiments: Interdisciplinary Challenges in American Studies* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. 101.



popular myth: that of unity and continuity. In my mind the book was supposed to take the shape of an archipelago; it was supposed to be a textual Caribbean. Shattered and yet somehow holding together, somehow incredibly vibrant and compelling.<sup>184</sup>

The fragmentary aspect of the contemporary world forces novelists to adapt to the actual panorama, and create new narratives which can faithfully depict the ‘hysterical’ rhythm of life and the solitary state towards which technology pushes people a bit more every day. This necessity launches once more the discussion on the boundaries of literary realism, and the way they can be modified in order to fit the reality of nowadays. Junot Díaz openly disputed the authority of the literary genre, by confessing his personal preference for models of novels that find themselves “at the narrative margins”, as being the only ones with which the author had been able to identify “personally and historically” speaking.<sup>185</sup> The author also comments on the way in which the new novel approaches the issue of character construction, a matter which finds itself at the core of realist writings, but which the contemporary novel situates on a second place. As an author, Junot Díaz explains that his preoccupation with providing a strong narrative is more important than creating multifaceted characters which evolve in parallel with the story line, and justifies it by appealing to the reader’s sense of reality and his understanding of the fictional world: “When I try to translate the human onto a simplistic axis like a book, I can do one of two things: I can pretend that I’m really giving you a full person, or I can accept the fact that you are getting nothing more than the most shattered transmission from across the galaxy of what is human.”<sup>186</sup> The writer considers that a round character would actually not fit in today’s narrative, as it fails to denote the fragmentary feeling of the current world. This perspective questions the efficiency of one of the basic principles of Villanueva’s intentional realism, dismissing process of *epoché* as an essential condition for achieving a realist actualization of the text, and focuses more on the experience of reading as a thought-provoking practice, rather than a comforting one: “The world is not interested in consoling anyone with narrative.”<sup>187</sup>

However, regardless of the numerous mutations that have affected the contemporary novel on the level of structure and content, one thing remained untouched: the writer’s role of

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<sup>184</sup> O’Rourke, *Questions for Junot Díaz*.

<sup>185</sup> Junot Díaz and Edwidge Danticat, *Bomb: The Author Interviews*, ed. By Betsy Sussler (New York: Soho Press, 2014).

<sup>186</sup> Evelyn Ch’ien, ‘The Exploding Planet of Junot Díaz’, *GRANTA*, 25 April 2008 <<http://granta.com/the-exploding-planet-of-junot-diaz/>> [accessed 5 June 2015].

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

communicating the truth. This basic epistemological requirement is reflected in all types of narratives, from the rigid Victorian novel to the hysterical realist narrative of actuality, although in a different form, which oscillates in close connection to the cultural values of the constantly changing society. Zadie Smith comments on the duty of the novelist to disclose the truth, though adapting it to the modern reader's expectations: "Truth means not that you read the book and think, "Ah, yes, I make a cup of tea exactly that way." It's not that. It has to be truth without generalization, without cliché, and without simplification which is almost impossible."<sup>188</sup> Hysterical realist novels show a vivid interest in exposing legitimate facts; however, Wood argues that this type of books will never be able to keep up with the rapid pace of society: "whatever the novel gets up to, the "culture" can always get up to something bigger."<sup>189</sup> The critic recommends contemporary writers to choose an alternative narrative, which focuses more on human beings and revealing the mechanism of consciousness. Nevertheless, Wood's proposal is restrictive and seems somehow incompatible with the highly interconnected world of today, where people are constantly bombed with information through all mediums of communication, including the literary one. Thus it should not come as a surprise the fact that contemporary novelists prefer to focus on keeping the reader updated with the latest transformations of society, rather than describe "how somebody felt about something."<sup>190</sup>

### **5.3. Peritextuality in *White Teeth* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

So far, I have considered only the epitextual apparatus of the two novels, consisting of interviews and critical reviews that their authors have made, in an attempt to determine the main reasons that lie behind choosing hysterical realism as a tool for a contemporary representation of reality. In the following paragraphs I will adopt a similar approach, but this time from the perspective of the interior world of the novel and of what Gerard Genette denominates peritexts.<sup>191</sup> Hysterical realist authors have expressed their interest to offer a global description of the world, often by emphasizing its interconnectedness, together with its fragmentary nature, and this preoccupation has left its imprint on various peritextual elements of the novel, such as titles, epigraphs, notes etc.

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<sup>188</sup> Camille Doderio, 'A Writer's Truth', *The Boston Phoenix*, 18 July 2003

<[http://thebostonphoenix.com/boston/news\\_features/qa/documents/03028816.asp](http://thebostonphoenix.com/boston/news_features/qa/documents/03028816.asp)> [accessed 3 June 2015]

<sup>189</sup> Wood, *Tell me how does it feel?*.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Genette, p. 5.

### 5.3.1. The function of the title *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

The title of Junot Díaz's novel is very representative for the hysterical realist genre, as it opens new spaces for cultural debates, while questioning the mainstream tendencies of today's world. The lengthy name, which comprises two adjectives and a proper name, plays various roles that allude to the reader's multiple levels of understanding (social, cultural etc.). The title introduces the main character of the novel, while concomitantly warning the reader about its brief existence. While interviewing Díaz, Edwidge Danticat identifies the purpose of "this person who is immediately named in the very title of the book and is claimed from namelessness" as to put the reader on the wrong track, creating the false impression of a *Bildungsroman*, when in fact being a novel of a nation.<sup>192</sup> This ambiguous relation between the title and the main theme of the novel violates the tradition of titology, which considers the name of the book in strong connection to its central idea or its prevailing symbols. In the spirit of the postmodernist thought, Díaz refuses to obey to these conventions and instead, he proposes an extended, ambiguous name which plays with the recipient's perception by misleading him into believing that the novel would focus on the key figure of Oscar, while in fact revolving around the story of the Dominican nation.

The name of the protagonist is a subtle hint for the experienced reader, who quickly associates Oscar Wao with the name of the famous Irish author, Oscar Wilde. The narrator explains that Oscar's colleagues were the ones responsible for the denomination, in an attempt to ridicule the boy for his Halloween costume of Dr. Who:

When I saw him on Easton, (...) I couldn't believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so. You look just like him, which was bad news for Oscar, because Melvin said, Oscar Wao, quién es Oscar Wao, and that was it, all of us started calling him that: Hey, Wao, what you doing? Wao, you want to get your feet off my chair?.<sup>193</sup>

However, apart from testing the reader's knowledge of the European literary canon, Díaz also alludes to cultural and political aspects of the mainstream culture. John Ligan identifies the various discourses that hide behind the author's decision to use the misspelled Spanish version of Wilde's name: "a word that simultaneously echoes the name of another genocidal

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<sup>192</sup> Junot Díaz and Edwidge Danticat, *Bomb: The Author Interviews*.

<sup>193</sup> Díaz, p. 180.

dictator and an English-language expression for amazement.”<sup>194</sup> These indirect references presuppose a previous background which situates itself outside the national sphere, and test the reader’s knowledge on a more global perspective. At the same time, these disparate cultural allusions highlight once more the interconnectedness that characterizes the Information Age of actuality, while at the same time creating hybrid realities where authors can freely illustrate their vision of the world.<sup>195</sup>

### 5.3.2. The ironic function of epigraphs in *White Teeth*

Epigraphs hold an important function within the world of the novel, where they comment or justify the text or the title of the book.<sup>196</sup> At the same time, they give novelists the opportunity to situate themselves among other authors of their choice; an association which already brings a sort of consecration to the novelist and his work before any critical reviews.<sup>197</sup> Smith employs this literary mechanism in her début novel *White Teeth*, which is divided into four major parts, each of them bearing the name of a character, two important years of their life and a representative quote, which gives the reader a clue as to what to expect from each of the protagonists. However, unlike other authors who use epigraphs in order to attach a deeper understanding to their works or to provoke the reader to reflect further on the presented facts, Smith engages them to convey a humorous and ironical perspective of her characters. In fact the narrator of *White Teeth* does not miss any opportunity to reveal protagonists’ strengths and weaknesses, often doing it in a mocking tone that reduces their humanly features.

The second part of Smith’s work revolves around the figure of Samad, the head of the Iqbal family and the representative of the Commonwealth immigrant who moved to England with the hope of building a better life. The narrator introduces the section together with a quote from Norman Tebbit, a famous British Conservative politician, well-known for his racist comments and his radical stand on the matter of immigration: “The cricket test - which side do they cheer for? ... Are you still looking back to where you came from or where you are?”.<sup>198</sup> The politician proposed the controversial “cricket test” in an interview for *Los*

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<sup>194</sup> John Langan, ‘The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz’, *The Quarterly Conversation* [n.d.] <<http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-brief-wondrous-life-of-oscar-wao-by-junot-diaz-review>> [accessed 5 June 2015]

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Genette, p. 156.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>198</sup> Smith, p. 123.

*Angeles Times* in 1990, in order to differentiate between immigrants that support the British cricket team and those who do not, arguing that “if people living permanently in Britain support other nations in sporting or other cultural events, then they have not sufficiently adapted themselves to British life, and cannot be therefore legitimately be called British.”<sup>199</sup>

As a Bangladeshi immigrant, Samad is completely obsessed with the idea of losing his cultural identity, which pushes him towards making radical decisions. In an attempt to control the influence that the Western culture has upon his twin sons, the man decides to send one of them to Bangladesh in order to receive a Muslim education, a decision which stirs up a deep animosity between him and his wife, Alsana. The story of Samad offers the readers the angle of the immigrant on the experience of living in the multicultural British society, and opens the discussion about the construction and conservation of cultural and national identities. Tebbit and Samad are the extreme representatives of two opposite ideologies which collide within the space of the novel: if the politician declares himself concerned with the future of Britishness in the context of mass migration, Smith’s character desperately tries to conserve and pass on his traditional values. This contradictory association has a humorous effect, while at the same time inviting the reader to reflect upon the political situation of the island and the importance of being informed and understanding all the distinctive facets of a problem. Therefore in the given case, the epigraph instigates a further discussion on multiculturalism, racism and identity<sup>200</sup>, while at the same time satirizing some obtuse political views on migration policies.

### **5.3.3. The function of footnotes in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

Footnotes represent another peritextual element which holds an important role in helping the reader contextualize certain concepts or facts. However, sometimes their function goes beyond the basic role of providing the “definitions or explanations of terms used in the text”<sup>201</sup>, as I will demonstrate in the following fragments.

One of the most striking aspects of Díaz’s novel is the quantity of footnotes that the author inserts along the main story line, which offer the uninformed reader important facts from the Dominican history: “For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican

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<sup>199</sup> Gerry Smyth, ‘Ethnicity and Language’, in *British Cultural Identities* ed. by Mike Storry and Peter Childs (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 209-238, (p. 225).

<sup>200</sup> Sylvia Hadjetian, *Multiculturalism and Magic Realism in Zadie Smith’s Novel White Teeth: Between Fiction and Reality* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2014), p. 60.

<sup>201</sup> Genette, p. 325.

history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's more infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality"<sup>202</sup>. However, these notes go beyond their instructional function and manage to alter the main trajectory of the novel, which at first seems to center around the figure of Oscar. Only later on does the reader acknowledge the second line of the novel, the story of the Dominican nation.<sup>203</sup> In an interview for Slate Magazine, the author emphasized the role that the footnotes held in creating a double narrative: "The footnotes are like the voice of the jester, contesting the proclamations of the king. In a book that's all about the dangers of dictatorship, the dangers of the single voice—this felt like a smart move to me."<sup>204</sup> The preoccupation with creating a multi-layered discourse originates in the contemporary authors' need to offer all the facets of truth, in this way letting the reader decide which one is the most relatable one. However, the question of the facts' verisimilitude arises various times along the story line, and the author admits that he is an unreliable narrator in a direct note to the reader:

I know what Negroes are going to say. Look, he's writing Suburban Tropical now. (...) Not believable. Should I go down to the Feria and pick me up a more representative model? Would it be better if I turned Ybon into this other puta I know, Jahyra, a friend and a neighbor in Villa Juana, who still lives in one of those old-style pink wooden houses with the zinc roof? ... But then I'd be lying. I know I've thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi into the mix, but this is supposed to be a true account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.<sup>205</sup>

The novel accounts for various intrusions of this kind, always in the form of a direct communication towards the reader, who is offered the chance to glance into the process of writing and understand the context in which the novel had been created.

However, not all footnotes focus on providing the reader with a wider historical perspective of the narrative, as some of them comment on genre literature and others explain Spanish terms. Díaz's passion for the science fiction genre is reflected directly in the numerous intertextual elements that he inserts along the narrative of *Oscar Wao*, which allude to the works of authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, Stan Lee or Edward Elmer "Doc" Smith. In this case, the footnotes do not actually contextualize these references, but they rather "depend on

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<sup>202</sup> Díaz, p. 2.

<sup>203</sup> Junot Díaz and Edwidge Danticat, *Bomb: The Author Interviews*.

<sup>204</sup> O'Rourke, *Questions for Junot Díaz*.

<sup>205</sup> Díaz, p. 284-5.

the reader's knowledge of genre literature rather than supplementing that knowledge."<sup>206</sup> Junot Díaz consciously disregards the difficulties that a reader with no previous acquaintance in the field of science fiction will encounter while trying to understand all the references, and he has a similar attitude when it comes to his non-Hispanic recipients. The majority of the Spanish words are incorporated within the text without further explanations, which makes the reading very challenging for someone who does not speak the language. However, when he decides to explain some terms that belong to the Dominican slang, the writer makes sure to offer the historical truth that lies behind its emergence: "The pejorative *parigüayo* (...) came into common usage during the First American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924."<sup>207</sup>

#### 5.4. Conclusion

The contemporary writer is faced with the task of portraying a constantly changing world, while at the same time attracting the attention of the modern reader, which proves to be an impossible task within the limits of conventional literary genres. Thus the new novel proposes an original form that can reflect the frantic rhythm of twenty first century life, and which focuses more on how the world works, rather than conveying a faithful portrayal of reality. Smith considers that a Stendhalian approach of portraying the world does no longer apply to the reality of nowadays, because it cannot express the simultaneous feelings of interconnectedness and fragmentation that dominate it.<sup>208</sup> The main concern of these writers is to offer information about the world, but always by challenging the reader's perception and cultural beliefs. These new tendencies are reflected in the peritextual apparatus of the new novels, such as titles, epigraphs or footnotes. These elements become handy mechanisms to convey important information for a more complex understanding of the novel. Hysterical realist titles frequently display a multilayered discourse which appeals to the reader's cultural background and knowledge of the world. Epigraphs and footnotes share a similar function, as they revolve around the idea of sharing knowledge and creating common spaces for further debates. But regardless of their instructive nature, these literary tools always employ a mocking tone against society, the reader or even the work and the author himself. This satirizing attitude which prevails in all hysterical realist narratives offers the reader a

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<sup>206</sup> Sean P. O'Brien, 'Some Assembly Required: Intertextuality, Marginalization, and "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao"', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 45, no. 1 (2012), pp. 75-94, (p. 78).

<sup>207</sup> Díaz, p. 19.

<sup>208</sup> Zadie Smith, 'This Is How It Feels to Me', *The Guardian*, 13 October 2001

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/13/fiction.afghanistan>> [accessed 6 June 2015].

distraction from the truly hysterical reality of today, even for as little as a few hours of reading. And as long as this type of narrative will manage to keep up with the constant transformations of the world, it will not disappear from the shelves of the bookstores, no matter how many critical reviews Mr. Wood would write about it.



## 6. Conclusions

The main objective of this dissertation has been to analyze the literary model proposed by hysterical realist novels in terms of reality production, in order to demonstrate the intrinsic connection between the structure and content of these narratives and the observed world. At the same time, the research situated the hysterical realist novel within the context of today's literature, and aimed to study its approach on the issue of the contemporary novel, in terms of function and literary tools.

As a primary question, the study aimed to answer why hysterical realist novels fail to convince their readers of their truthfulness, regardless of the fact that their stories fulfilled the condition of verisimilitude. The first step was to identify the ways in which these novels achieve the effect of reality, by applying Darío Villanueva's concept of intentional realism and its corresponding principles and hypothesis to the corpus of hysterical realist books. The textual analysis revealed the fact that these novels display a complicated web of events which comply with the condition of truthfulness on an individual level, as each of their composing episodes seem to be plausible while taken on its own. While considered as a whole, these stories compose into an incredible narrative, which invalidates the overall realistic effect of the novel. However, in terms of Villanueva's dual aspect of the literary text, it is important to point out that the interruption of the text's realistic fallout does not occur within the fictional world of the book, but at the level of the reader's actualization of the work, as he fails to transfer the fictional episodes within his own observed reality.

As far as the character construction is concerned, hysterical realist narratives showcase schematic representations of human beings which cannot convince the public of their incidence within the real world. At the same time, the author insists on the credibility of its protagonists by maintaining their consistency inside the universe of the narrative and by emphasizing their interconnectedness. This approach steps away from the norms of literary realism, which advocates for an accurate portrayal of personalities and emotions that can comprise various aspects of the human nature. The answer for this deviation from the rule lies in the main purpose of the hysterical realist novel, which I will discuss in the following paragraph.

The secondary objective of the paper was to consider the way in which hysterical realist novels keep up with the constantly changing reality of today's world, and how this process is

reflected within the world of the novel, through means of structure, content and literary tools. This analysis forms part of a larger discussion on the form of the contemporary novel and its main function inside today's literature. One of the main findings indicates the fact that hysterical realist authors prefer to concentrate on sharing information and exposing facts, rather than portraying reality in a faithful manner, an approach which contradicts the traditional mimetic principle of literary realism. Therefore these writers overcame their basic function of offering an accurate representation of a minor reality, and embraced their role as knowledge sharers, by offering a global view on society and its main cultural tendencies. This renewed approach on reality has generated a new form of the novel, which reflects the contradicting feelings of fragmentation and interconnectedness that dominate the world of today.

The analysis of the peritextual apparatus of the two hysterical realist narratives has illustrated the fact that these elements accomplish a double function. On the one hand, they convey important information for a deeper understanding of the story line, while on the other, they appeal to the reader's knowledge of the world, which reinforces the status of hysterical realist authors as agents of the latest cultural trends. For example, in hysterical realist books, peritextual elements such as footnotes can overcome their traditional function to explain or add meaning to a certain paragraph, and instead they can be used to construct an alternative narrative, which complements the novel's main line of events. This case illustrates the fact that hysterical realist authors constantly renegotiate the conventions of the novel and of the literary genre, in their quest of providing the reader with a modern perspective on today's world.

The object of this research has been debated in various studies, but always in close connection to a particular novel or as a direct response to Wood's original critique. However, the hybrid character of hysterical realism and its lack of a definite theoretical framework have held back the literary criticism from establishing it as an original genre. This literary phenomenon has always been classified as being part of various genres, depending on the content and the structure of the novel in question, which situated the hysterical realist novel in a shadow cone and stopped it from formulating its own literary precepts. Thus the present research is of particular importance, because it is the only study which attempts to illustrate the ideological agenda of hysterical realism, thus offering a global view on the matter, rather than restricting its application to the context of a specific novel. Despite its limited corpus, this research has opened the way for a further investigation on hysterical realism as an

independent genre, not only in terms of theoretical considerations, but also in connection to the existing prospects of the contemporary novel. I believe that this investigation can serve as a starting point for a larger research on the matter, which can count with a more substantial corpus of hysterical realist works; thus paving the way for the authentication of this new literary genre.

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